Is Our Age Destined to Incarnate Democracy Itself?

Maria Stavrinaki
Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic reference
Maria Stavrinaki, « Is Our Age Destined to Incarnate Democracy Itself? », Critique d'art [Online], 44 | Printemps/Été 2015, Online since 01 June 2016, connection on 05 January 2017. URL : http://critiquedart.revues.org/17120 ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.17120

This text was automatically generated on 5 janvier 2017.

Archives de la critique d'art
Is Our Age Destined to Incarnate Democracy Itself?

Maria Stavrinaki

Translation: Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Maxence Caron, De l’art comme résistance à l’implication politique, Paris: Séguier, 2015
Chantal Mouffe, Agonistique: penser politiquement le monde, Paris: Beaux-arts de Paris les éditions, 2014, (D’art en questions)
Political Interventions, Bâle : Christoph Merian ; Genève : Migros-Kulturprozent, 2014, (Edition Digital Culture)
Post, Porn, Politics: Queer-feminist Perspective on the Politics of Porn Performance and Sex-work as Culture Production, Berlin: B_Books, 2009
Modes of Democracy, Prague: DOX Centre for Contemporary Art, 2014. Sous la dir. de Jaroslav Anděl

These seven books form an exploded set. The splitting, dictated by the actual theme developed in this current publishing programme, lends the selection of titles a far-reaching coherence. The theme has to do with the relations woven by modern and contemporary art with politics, and more particularly with democracy. These relations were never unambiguous. Subject, quite to the contrary, to indeterminacy and conflict, the explosion is not the simple outcome of the eclectic, not to say divergent, practices which are defended by these publications. It lies at the heart of these practices, both as a
nightmare from which to be freed, and as a utopia which has once again become credible and thus defensible, bearing that very explosion in mind.

Let us imagine this set dispersed and heterogeneous like a landscape with two extremities. Although they are both equally radical and excessive, we shall be careful not to consider them as symmetrical and equivalent. Maxence Caron’s *De l’art comme résistance à l’implication politique* is an essay that stems both from the pamphlet and the diary. Through his resentment against the day and age in general and contemporary art in particular, Caron rediscovers the pamphleteering tradition of someone like Céline, though he is at pains to remain somewhat aloof from him because of his anti-semitism. If his essay smacks of the diary, this is as a result of his narcissistic self-sufficiency. It also smacks of it because of its consistent depth and its watered down discourse, which seems to have been penned day by day as if to relieve the author from who knows what insufferable commotion.

This is why it would be disloyal to treat the book *Post, Porn, Politics*, edited by Tim Stüttgen, as the perfect equivalent of Maxence Caron’s work: despite the considerable reservations that this book may cause us, its excesses are affirmative, and not negative, and its narcissism, which is autarkic in so far as is possible, is not informed by contempt for the other. In being incorporated in the most faithful—and thus in the least critical—way in queer thinking, *Post, Porn, Politics* is a manifesto of pornographic art, whose intent is to shed full light on one of the last “secret cabinets” of our day and age, one of the very last things to have escaped the absolute transparency of criticism: porn. This book acknowledges what it owes not only to all the thinkers of biopolitics, starting with Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, but also to the theoretician of what has been known, since last year, as porn studies: the philosopher Beatriz Preciado. The prefix “post” does not simply refer to the experience of historical time—invariably belated—which is ours. It refers to the direct genealogy which porn studies are part and parcel of: cultural studies, whose ideological propriety, which borders on self-censorship, they criticize, and gender studies, focused exclusively on the inequality between men and women. If *Post, Porn, Politics* turns every spectator into a peeping tom, in order the better to lay bare the systems of power which govern sexuality and art, Maxence Caron identifies with a tradition which renounces the affairs of the city, extending from St. Augustine to Stéphane Mallarmé, by way, paradoxically, of Richard Wagner, one of the rare artists to have seen the King submit to his desires by making the Temple of his dreams. With Philippe Muray, the author of *Le Dix-neuvième siècle à travers les âges*, to whom, incidentally, he devotes his first chapter, Caron shares the same loathing of democratic suffrage, crowds, women—appearing through his pen in the company of animals, the sick, and the elderly (p. 15)—, and selfish and impatient desires, the logic behind which was analyzed by Jacques Rancière—among many others—all of ten years ago in *La Haine de la démocratie*. From Joseph de Maistre to Maxence Caron by way of Philippe Muray, evolution contains quite enough to confirm our worst fears, if we had a vision of history on the decline, for there is little to offer protection from the horde in the secret temple in which Caron “holds his own”. On the other hand, the book compiled by Stüttgen, consisting of one or two theoretical essays and a lot of interviews, either oral or written, with artists putting on performances and making porn movies, is intended to be many-voiced. It duly lays claim to the end of all privacy and all secrecy. But as page follows page its many-voicedness turns out to be oddly monotonous, skimming a solipsism in reverse and, by erasing any difference between the private and the public, the book fails in its
critical end purpose. This exhibitionism has done away with the moving, reciprocal and interchangeable gap between the outside and the inside, society and me, reality and fiction—and with it the condition of any critical proposition. On the epistemological level, readers will also note the absence of any historical perspective—there is no Olympia to be found in the genealogy of Post, Porn, Politics. Plunged in a weightlessness rooted in the present, this book reproduces, as if unbeknownst to it, many practices of power, as is implicit in the coinage, through porn studies, of a whole ultra-specialized jargon of terms, knowledge or ignorance of which certainly produces their own divisions.

4 With the books by the sociologist Daniel Vander Gucht and the political theoretician Chantal Mouffe, there is a switch in approach. We are no longer in the diary and the manifesto, with their ephemeral time-frames, for now we enter a longer time-span, that of synthetic and retrospective studies. The two authors defend the necessity for political action, especially on the part of artists, to whom Chantal Mouffe devotes only her final chapter. From Vander Gucht’s book L’Expérience politique de l’art : retour sur la définition de l’art engagé there wafts an air that is almost classical because of its dubious vicinity with other books in this set (involved, incidentally, is the republication of a book that first appeared ten years ago). Keen to incorporate his questions within an historical perspective, the author often goes back to that despised century of crowds and democratic aporia, the 19th, which—Muray was right—has been forever coming back like some frightful nightmare. This concern for history, ranging from Gustave Courbet to the sociological art of the 1970s, by way of the avant-gardes, is not the sole expression of his critical stance with regard to his own discipline. We should remember, here, the significance of the antagonism between sociology, anthropology and history in the configuration of the social sciences in the postwar years, in the 1950s and 1960s. Vander Gucht right away questions one or two of Nathalie Heinich’s Swift assertions about cultural sociology and, inevitably, Pierre Bourdieu’s determinism.

5 However, this self-reflective work does not always go as far as it promises. The author may be suspicious of the discourse about margins as the supposed space suited to the action of art, but he scarcely questions the future as its temporal equivalent. The fact is that this future, which artists have inhabited since Romanticism, transforms misérabilist margins into a summit hierarchically occupied by artists, who have become considerably less subversive than the doxa would like. Interwoven with this idea, the conception of a “failure” of the avant-gardes underlies the identity of their vision and their powerlessness to realize it. We may well wonder for instance whether the reformist project of the Bauhaus has not succeeded from many a viewpoint. Was that project really identical to that of Russian Constructivism? And was this latter simply crushed by the Stalinist powers-that-be? So many questions likely to jostle the division of roles between those blocs represented by “power” on the one hand and the avant-gardes on the other; so many questions likely to prevent us from talking about anything “avant-garde”. Likewise, if notions such as the art of representation, the medium and art coming out in life formerly helped to articulate a modernist discourse, they no longer respond to the conceptual emergencies of our day and age. Vander Gucht’s book is nevertheless a book of persuasion. Its intent is to once again question Brechtian thinking and it defends the critical necessity of art, even when the restrictive systems in which it must move are as diffuse and invincible as they are today.

6 Chantal Mouffe’s book is another kind of synthesis: something akin to an updating of the author’s earlier writings. If we set aside brief references to recent political goings-on,
associated with the financial and social crisis which started in 2008, this book is a condensed re-make of theses formulated a while ago, or a confirmation of those theses by comparing them with other more or less topical political theories. The two concepts which preside over the set of issues dealt with by Mouffe are that of the agonistic, or polemical, which incidentally, lends its structure to her argument (thesis, antithesis, thesis confirmed, or, more rarely, slightly adjusted) and that of hegemony. If Gramsci’s precedent to do with the thinking about hegemony is the object of one or two allusions in the text, the thoughts which have developed conflictual reflections about democracy, like the decisive one put forward by Claude Lefort, are not mentioned here. But it is possible to think that the conflictual conception of democracy proposed by Lefort differs a great deal through its indeterminate, tense and in the end aporetic character from Chantal Mouffe’s, for her thinking and demonstration have something doggedly mechanical about them. Her abstract and at times disembodied discourse consists in repetitive and schematic movements which can be more or less summed up as follows: a polemic will end in a hegemony, which will be partly upset by a new polemic, and so on and so forth.

With Matthieu Saladin’s *Esthétique de l’improvisation libre: expérimentation musicale et politique*, we leave the field of general theoretical studies and delve into the specialized world of musicology. One of the merits of this book is that the rigour observed with regard to its specific topic—free improvisation in the experimental music of the 1960s and 1970s—goes hand-in-hand with broader issues. Political involvement is one of the cases developed; it does not proceed by way of militancy, properly so-called, but is broadcast by the formal systems of art. Themes like that of the artists’ collective and free improvisation imply a series of inextricably political and aesthetic choices, like equality, the discreet exercise of freedom, anonymity, and indeterminacy. In a secondary way, studies about Neo-Dada and Fluxus are broadened by this work devoted to musical practices which are very close to them.

The last two titles in this set present current artistic practices which take democratic exigency literally, and are intended as above all political programmes. *Modes of Democracy* is the catalogue for an exhibition, curated by Jaroslav Anděl, which has just been on view at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Prague. As its title suggests, the project’s central idea is that democracy can only be “practiced” in a myriad forms, and using several methods. First of all there is the matter of scale. The choice of artists taking part in the show corresponds to the conjunction of the global and the local. If the project starts with Edward Snowden’s resistance work, together with that of the film-maker Laura Poitras and the Guardian journalist Glen Greenwald, involving the surveillance of the entire world by the NSA, the National Security Agency, that literally global system and its critical deconstruction are then broken down into a whole host of local narratives. These loci are scattered all over the planet: in Brazil, where artists have set up cooperative restaurants championing access to good food and artistic activities; in Iceland, where the abortive project involving a written constitution after the recent banking crisis by representatives of the people drawn by lot was filmed by Libia Castro & Olafur Olafsson; in the Sudetenland, in the present-day Czech Republic, where a certain number of artists have delved into local memories of the Nazi occupation and the revenge taken against the Germans which followed that occupation, as if to demonstrate its perseverance in new forms of exclusion; in the South Tyrol, where artists are also working on the imperceptible continuity between yesterday’s racism and today’s racism, when emigration and “native” ethnic groups intermingle; and in Colombia, where a 12-mile
railway line cutting a town in two, and long since not used for transporting people and goods, has been occupied by a group of artists and architects to create meeting places along it, with the participation of the citizenry. Let us therefore take note of the eclectic nature of these activities (performances, installations, films, and the everyday organization of alternative social systems), their at times critical action, at others affirmative, and their use of memory. This latter, rooted in the local, encloses a past that is not past, because it can be re-written, re-used and converted by the present.

Political Interventions is a book which fits into the same area of democratic artistic commitment. Edited by Dominik Landwehr, this work, in German and English, focuses on the work of two Swiss artists, Christoph Wachter and Mathias Jud. In the wake of the Benjamin-inspired idea of “the artist as producer”, the two artists have developed a series of political programmes using digital resources, production methods and utilization of present-day technological means. The book blindly adopts the theme of the subversive power of art—a fathomless question, which deserves, at the very least, to be questioned—, which does not do justice to the ideological and formal perspicaciousness of certain actions undertaken by Wachter and Jud. Zone interdite proposes a website hosting the mapping and a database of military zones and prisons, headed by Guantanamo, jihadist training camps, and the like, scattered throughout the world; [opicidae is intent upon withstanding efforts to censor the Internet in China and in the United Arab Emirates, by creating web pages for those requesting them, just as New Nations offers Internet addresses for unrecognized groups like the Tibetans and the Uighurs (“.uu” for the Uighurs, “.ku” for the Kurds, and “.ti” for the Tibetans). The logic at work is that of camouflage, because both artists appropriate the techniques of Internet production by diverting them from their customary use, while reinstating a critical and affirmative “use value”. Nevertheless, when the two artists leave the mimetic level and rediscover flesh-and-blood people, the problems start: this is how it is with their project HOTEL GELEM (2011), which involved the transformation of a Roma camp in Montreuil into a “hotel”. The travelling populace, if ever there was, accommodated other “travellers”, those who wanted that, for a few days. As understood and worked out by the two artists, the themes of “travel” and “hospitality” are not convincing. On the one hand, understanding the Roma today as “travellers” and not as economic and political émigrés poses problems. On the other hand, we may well wonder what the difference is between HOTEL GELEM and the invention of the tourist industry, which consists in organizing journeys in Africa and South Asia where, instead of visiting sites, Westerners share the daily lives of the inhabitants for ten days. What were the political conclusions drawn by the two artists, and by the author of this book, when the European Community, whose policy with regard to the Roma—to stay just with them—leaves so much to be desired, awarded a prize to the two artists for this project? Art as a moral alibi of power? This risk is very present, even when the “power” is more insubstantial, and emptier than ever.

Nowadays, forms of collective Messianism seem so removed. There is reason to mistrust a Messianism of splitting, which persistently arises here and there. On the pretext that everything is fragmented, partial and diverse, and that everything is everything, our day and age is apparently destined to incarnate democracy itself. As if, for the simple reason that we are constantly and immediately “connected”, our age is teleologically predestined for it.
NOTES


5. www.zone-interdite.net

6. www.new-nations.net

7. www.hotel-gelem.net