

Making Waves 3

research workshop

BEYOND POLITICS? AESTHETICS & SOCIETY

Table 3 ART & POLITICS

Short impression of the table conversation by Rosa Mulder.

The table conversation on “Art & the Post-Political” started with a short introduction by Erdem Colak, artist and PhD student at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA). Together with eight participants, Colak questioned the position of contemporary art in a “post-political” frame. The “post-political” concerns the last three decades, the post-communist era after the end of the Cold War, and critiques the assumed logic of political consensus. This critique relates to theories by political theorist Chantal Mouffe and philosopher Jacques Rancière. According to Mouffe, prevailing capitalist and liberal thought establishes certain notions and represses other understandings. As such, the political system is negating the antagonistic and pluralistic dimension of society. During the table conversation, Mouffe’s theory was extended by Rancière’s notions of “the political” and “politics.” In Rancière’s terms, the political system, or police, embodies the earlier mentioned consensus and established order. Accordingly, his understanding of politics refers to the antagonistic dimension that recognizes inequality and unheard voices. Apart from recognition, the notion of politics also embodies the potential to contest and challenge consensus.

After having discussed these main theories and concepts, several questions were raised: What is the role of politics and the political? How can we map the art world after 1989 in terms of its relation to politics and the political? And how might we redetermine the role of art and politics in societies? Several participants stated that the fast pace of globalization and identity politics are of great importance for these questions. On the one hand, globalization makes our world bigger, for example, in the sense that we might know about all kind of inequalities. At the same time, we might not be sure how to deal with such uncomfortable knowledge. On the other hand, globalization also makes individuals bigger. It feels like one can never be part of one group or identity because all these groups seem fluid, instead one can speak of multiplying identities. That makes it hard to find your identities and that, in turn, creates an urge for recognition. As one is trying to find out how to handle all the perspectives that come along with globalization it also feels like everyone stays in one’s own bubble since a space for dialogue and dissensus is lacking.

Thus, how can art function as a tool to challenge the political? To see how art can create spaces to disagree with one another, several artworks in the public space were discussed. One of these examples was the artwork *I Was a Stranger and You Took Me In* by Olu Oguibe. During Documenta 14 in Kassel in 2017, this monument for strangers on the city’s main square provoked many questions. Though the artwork was supposed to stay at the square, also after the event, a local right-wing group enforced the replacement of the obelisk. One can also wonder who should be identified as stranger and others questioned why an Afro-American artist should tell the people in Kassel to welcome strangers. Subsequently, the participants agreed that art is understood differently by people, and as such art can disrupt and open up spaces of dissensus. This made the table conversation return to Mouffe’s statement that public space offers the possibility for intervention and that agonistic practices by means of art can offer possibilities to reactivate the oppressed and transform an existing consensus.