PUBLIC SPACE – A CONCEPT UNDER NEGOTIATION[1]

By choosing the exhibition title *A Space Called Public*, the artists and curators Elmgreen and Dragset zoom in on a key issue: that so-called 'public space' defies any definition that pleases all the people all the time. Public space is, on the contrary, a heavily debated entity that escapes definitive categories, is under constant negotiation, and is therefore often open to the attribution of new meanings. We are, in other words, not dealing with any pre-defined quality of the space, since 'public' is something we can all – with various and displaced understandings in mind – choose to *call* certain spaces.

The exhibition project *A Space Called Public* addresses the issue of what constitutes public space in an open, curious and questioning manner: provoking questions and generating debate on the different concepts and expectations we have of urban public space. Introducing artworks throughout the city of Munich, the exhibition sets out to explore the nature of public space. Because what do we really understand by the term public space? What are its specific characteristics? And is it possible for us to interact according to its existing rules? These are issues I examine here from the perspective of a series of central theoretical positions within the field.

The Ideal and Rationality-Based Space

Traditionally, the public sphere has been seen as the opposite of the private sphere, defined as it has been as the space where the private right to decide is superseded by the community's right to decide. The German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas is among the most influential exponents of this position. In his frequently cited principal work *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962/1974), he analyses how bourgeois society emerged as a specific, historical formation in Europe during the 1700s. The emergence of this social formation was inextricably linked to the emergence of a new bourgeoisie, characterised by the sharp divisions it made between the private and the public sphere. Unlike the fluid boundaries between the two under feudalism, bourgeois society drew a clearly defined line of demarcation between them. According to Habermas, this division is a key condition for the formation of bourgeois society, precisely because such a model of society is based on the idea that private individuals can enter a community of interests with a view to confronting state authorities with politically motivated demands, requests and suggestions for reform. Habermas thus defines bourgeois society as a sphere where private individuals meet to discuss the rules for coexistence. Habermas calls the condition and medium for this discussion 'public opinion' (Habermas, 1974: 79) Habermas' term identifies a key characteristic of bourgeois society, in that it implies a communicative forum that is open and accessible to all. Bourgeois society is thus identified as a sphere based on consensus-seeking rationality

[1] This article will later be included in revised form in the book *Art in Public Spaces – Conflict and Negotiation as Spatial Practices*, based on the author's PhD thesis and published in Danish and English by KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces.

and comprehension-oriented action, and is further defined by its separation from state and economic authorities.

With his definition of bourgeois society as a sphere where private individuals can reach a rational consensus through political discussion and the strength of their arguments, Habermas' analysis is not limited to a descriptive definition of a historical formation. He also provides a critique of the decline of this public culture. Habermas sees this decline as typical of contemporary society, where the boundary between the private and the public is being increasingly erased as a result of the growing dominance of the mass media and electronic communication, as well as the increased influence of NGOs and corporations on state authorities. According to Habermas, this erasure of boundaries results in the formation of an indefinable zone in which the state and society infiltrate each other without the intervention of the political reasoning of private individuals, i.e. a bourgeois society that can function as a counterbalance to current developments (Habermas 1999: 57-59).

A similar critique of the development of public space during the 20th century is put forward by the American sociologist Richard Sennett. In his work *The Fall of Public Man*, Sennett presents public space as a prerequisite for a functioning democracy. To illustrate his point, he presents a historical overview of the public zones of Ancient Greece, with the *agora* as the point of origin for civilisation and the democracy movement. Where the Greek city-state had the agora, and where the metropolises of early modernity had, for example, public spaces like coffee houses, salons, cafés, parks, and boulevards where citizens could meet and discuss beyond the boundaries of social class, Sennett claims that in contemporary society the private sphere is increasingly prioritised and thus supersedes public space - understood as a free space. According to Sennett, public space thus becomes subject to privatisation, instrumentalisation and commercialisation. At the same time, it takes on the character of a stage for more self-centred forms of behaviour, where the need of citizens for self-promotion dominates at the expense of the democratically based goal of safeguarding the interests of the community. Like Habermas, Sennett sees public space as a condition for the realisation of a democratic society: a condition that is currently being eroded due to its increasing instrumentalisation and subjection to private interests. But whereas a theorist like Habermas defines the public sphere as a discursive space – i.e. a social sphere for communicative action – Sennett has a more physical, material understanding of the public sphere. Sennett sees public space as a concrete space expressed, for example, in the city's architectural articulations and infrastructural network. Despite this difference, both Habermas and Sennett base their theories on the argument that the public sphere of late-modern society should ideally be administered by the state, to ensure its accessibility to citizens. This is the only way, they argue, that the public sphere can function as an open and accessible forum where the very foundation for democratic society can be guaranteed by the free and unrestrained exchange of opinion between its citizens.

The Territorial Space for Action

Habermas and Sennett's idea of an open, inclusive and rationality-based public sphere, characterised by being beyond the reach of political and economic influence, has been criticised from several fronts. The German philosopher Hannah Arendt is a key theorist whose definition of the public sphere differs on key points from that of Habermas and Sennett's as an ideal and intentionally governed space. In *The Human Condition,* published in 1958, *(*1958/1998) Arendt states that the basic conditions for human existence can be defined by three forms of activity: labour, work and action. According to Arendt, *labour* refers to the biologically based processes that ensure the creation and sustenance of human life, whereas *work* refers to the production of material artefacts (Arendt 1998: 7). The third form of activity, *action*, relates to communicative, socialising processes, i.e. speech and the physical acts through which we, as individuals, enter society, interact, and take steps towards new initiatives. (Arendt 1998: 176-177).

As a socialisation process, *action* is also a concept that can be attributed political potential, and Arendt makes an explicit connection to the democratic administration of the Greek city-state. Arendt defines the Greek city-state as a prototype of the politically negotiated public sphere, where decisions are made on the basis of dialogue, persuasion and the exchange of opinion, rather than the exercise of repressive power and violence (Arendt 1998: 26). According to Arendt, action in the social spheres of the city-state is therefore closely linked to the existential and political demand to be an actively engaged individual.

In representing the Greek city-state as the prototype of the public sphere, Arendt's theoretical considerations can be seen to concord with Sennett's, although in this context it is important to note that Arendt, unlike Sennett, does not subscribe to a physical, material understanding of urban public space. Arendt does not limit her definition of the public sphere to a geographical site or formally constituted political forum. Instead, she sees it as the socially conditional organisation of people that emerges as the result of discursive expressions and action-based initiatives, independent of where those involved are located in relationship to each other:

> ”The *polis,* properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be." (Arendt 1998: 198).

Arendt thus operates with a relational view of the public sphere, in that she accentuates the processual and socially produced nature of its coming into being (Arendt 1998: 190-191). According to Arendt, it is neither the individual's intention nor formally institutionalised initiatives that are key, since action as a form of activity is characterised by its ”unpredictability in outcome, irreversibility of the process, and the anonymity of its authors” (Arendt 1998: 220). More central for Arendt, is the potential for change and transformation that every social action contains, yet which can never be predicted given the

impossibility of planning all the relational effects constantly and inevitably caused by interpersonal actions" (Arendt 1998: 190-191).

Arendt's view of the public sphere also deviates from that of Habermas and Sennett on another crucial point – something I touched on above. In contrast to their ideal of the public sphere as a democratic, accessible and consensus-oriented space, Arendt operates from a perspective based on real power. According to Arendt, the public sphere is constituted by social power relations, something she makes very clear in stating: "Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence." (Arendt 1998: 200). As well as accentuating the foundation of the public sphere in power relations, Arendt is also a spokeswoman for a concept of the public that, to a far greater extent than Habermas and Sennett's, takes the complexity of social spaces into account. Arendt thus argues that the public sphere is based on plurality, since the individual members of any given society will always appear differently in relationship to each other. Pluralism is, in other words, defined as the very condition for the political negotiation of the public sphere, or, in Arendt's own terms, as "*the* condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life." (Arendt 1998: 7). Following this reasoning, Arendt does not present the public sphere solely as an idealised space for harmonious coexistence. She also sees it as a complex place where different – and sometimes conflicting – interests are constantly played out against each other.

In this context, it is also worth noting that Arendt, in her analysis of the pluralism of the public sphere, makes a distinction between the concepts of strength and power. While strength is characterised by being based in the individual and therefore indivisible, power is socially constituted and therefore divisible. Power grows exponentially with the plurality of a space as a result of the active and dynamic interaction between oppositional forces. On the basis of this reasoning, Arendt concludes that power relations in the public sphere are not created *in spite of* but rather *because of* its constitutive heterogeneity. Power is not only influenced by the plurality of the public sphere, but "*corresponds* to the condition of plurality" (Arendt 1998: 201 – my emphasis). The basis for the continuing generation of power is thus closely linked to human coexistence. In the current context this point is particularly pertinent, since Arendt makes explicit that urban growth is the most significant precondition for the constitution of power:

> "The only indispensible material factor in the generation of power is the living together of people. Only when men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them, and the foundation of cities, which as city-states have remained paradigmatic for all Western political organization, is therefore indeed the most important material prerequisite for power." (Arendt 1998: 201)

A Particular Space

Since Arendt sees the public sphere as a territorial space permeated by power relations, her concept of the public sphere can be seen to anticipate a position that has emerged more recently in the theoretical field. Exponents of this position include theorists like the art historian Rosalyn Deutsche, the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, as well as the social theorists Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. Like Arendt, these theorists see public space as a conflicted field where divergent interests are constantly negotiated and renegotiated on the basis of variable power constellations. According to this analysis, relating to the public sphere involves operating with the idea of an unstable zone of negotiation and - by immediate extension - retaining a focus on the alternating power constellations that contribute to the constitution of the field. As Chantal Mouffe states, it is consequently crucial to analyse and expose the power relations and exclusion mechanisms of public space so they can be debated democratically: ”Instead of trying to erase the traces of power and exclusion, democratic politics requires that they be brought to the fore, making them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation.” (Mouffe 2005: 149).

In this context, it is important to note that the point here is *not* that the public sphere ceases to be public. On the contrary, it is precisely the fact that it is a disputed field of negotiation characterised by continuous social power conflicts that ensures its status as a public space in any genuine sense. In Rosalyn Deutsche’s definition, public space is: ”the social space where, in the absence of a foundation, the meaning and unity of the social is negotiated – at once constituted and put at risk. What is recognized in public space is the legitimacy of debate about what is legitimate and what is illegitimate.” (1996: 273). Public space is thus defined as an ambiguous zone, where communities are simultaneously created and challenged: a zone where social situations are staged, and where battles over territory are constantly fought through power struggles, debates and negotiations. A central point, furthermore, is that conflict is not a phenomenon inflicted from the outside on a basically free and harmoniously organised public space. On the contrary, according to Deutsche conflict should be understood as a fundamental condition that constitutes and produces public space: ”Conflict is not something that befalls an originally, or potentially, harmonious urban space. Urban space is the product of conflict.” (1996: 278).

The acknowledgement that public space is founded on difference and conflicting interests is a view the theorists above share with Arendt. According to Arendt’s reasoning, plurality is a basic condition for both human existence and political life. As Arendt writes, difference is to be understood as ”the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (Arendt 1998: 8). Pluralism is subsequently a focal point for Arendt, who sees its acknowledgement as a prerequisite for every existential and political act.

Despite the obvious parallels, there are also clear differences between Arendt and later exponents’ concepts of public space as a territorial zone permeated

by power relations. Whereas in Arendt's analysis the conflicted negotiation zones of the public sphere operate with the human as agent, i.e. with a universal and non-specified individual as an entity demarcated in relationship to other agents in the public sphere, later theorists place greater emphasis on the particular complexity of public space: their definitions of the negotiation zones of public space are more focussed on analysing the concrete specificities, differences and conflicts. Rather than addressing a general public that comprises a humanistic and universally based entity, these theorists are more interested in defining public space as a heterogeneous field consisting of specific, context-specific and mutually divergent subject positions.

Diversity and Dissensus

The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy is among the theorists who have separated the concept of *singularity* from ideas of individuality and autonomous, demarcated subjectivity most convincingly. In his works, Nancy rethinks concepts of public space and the very idea of sociality in ways not based on the individual subject. One of his central arguments is that 'being' is always identical with 'being with, that 'I' does not precede 'we', and that existence is basically to be understood as coexistence. In this context, however, it is necessary to note that Nancy does not see 'being with' as comfortable incorporation into a previously existing group. Rather, he sees it as a state characterised by mutual surrender and exposure: a state that makes it possible to both retain singular subject positions and ensure their freedom through the imagining of alternative forms of sociality. According to Nancy, we constantly live out complex, fragmented and incoherent subject positions, and the different determinants of our identity – like race, ethnicity, cultural belonging and language – are often apparently in conflict with each other. As he formulates it in the work *Being Singular Plural* (2000), the collectivity of public space can therefore not be seen as homogenous, but as a pluralistic field of separate, intertwined and simultaneously coexisting subject positions:

> "*We* can never simply be "the we", understood as a unique subject, or understood as an indistinct "we" that is like a diffuse generality. "We" always expresses a plurality, expresses "our" being divided and entangled; "one" is not "with" in some general sort of way, but each time according to determined modes that are themselves multiple and simultaneous (people, culture, language, lineage, network, group, couple, band and so on). What is presented in this way, each time, is a stage [*scène*] on which several [people] can say "I" on his own account, each in turn." (Nancy 2000: 65).

Nancy's definition of public space as a pluralist stage occupied by multiple and simultaneously coexisting subject positions is paralleled by Mouffe, who describes public space as a zone consisting of "a bounded yet heterogeneous, unstable and necessarily antagonistic 'we'" (quoted in Donald 1999: 100). As well as noting Mouffe's emphasis on public space's heterogeneous and processual character, in the context at hand it is important to note how she also emphasises the presence of an always necessarily

antagonistic ‘we’. On this point she positions herself in explicit opposition to Arendt’s views above. According to Mouffe, Arendt acknowledges diversity as a basic condition, just as she admits the impossibility of any realisation of the public sphere as a homogenous field for free and harmonious coexistence. Yet she appears to be incapable of reconciling herself with the antagonistic dimension of the political. Arendt thus articulates the goal of the democratic structuring of the public sphere in accordance with the discourse of universal moral philosophy, just as she – in extension of this – sees democratically minded action as a gesture that has its primary ethical claim in the continuing attempt to acknowledge the fundamental differences of other members of society. By using what Mouffe calls ”an ethical-particularistic approach”, Arendt is seen as substituting *politically* motivated reflection on antagonistic conflicts of interest with *ethical* reflection (Mouffe 2009: 129). According to Mouffe, it is Arendt’s humanistic approach, understood as her ambition to guarantee a universally based principle of equality between all members of society, that makes her the exponent of an idealised view of sociality, a view Mouffe does not see as being based in reality. Arendt’s view that conflicts and exclusionary mechanisms could, ideally seen, be eliminated to the extent that we as citizens learn to take responsibility for each other and acknowledge the differences between us, fails to take into account the antagonistic ‘we’ Mouffe defines above as constituting the conflicted zones of negotiation in public space.

The Radicalisation of a Democratic Space

According to Mouffe’s reflections on what she calls a radical and pluralistic democracy, public space is characterised by its permeation by exclusionary power relations. Following this reasoning, Mouffe argues that the creation of a democratic space is only possible when the members of a community are aware of the naturalised, exclusionary mechanisms that are at the very foundation of the space in question. In other words, pluralistic democracy can only be realised when those in public space are conscious that the constitution of any given community is always based on contingent lines of demarcation and power-related exclusions, or on what Mouffe elsewhere, with an implicit reference to Jaques Derrida, calls its ’constitutive outside’:

> ”This reveals that there is no identity that is self-present to itself and not constructed as difference, and that any social objectivity is ultimately political and has to show traces of the exclusion which governs its constitution, what we can call its ’constitutive outside’. As a consequence, all systems of social relations imply to a certain extent relations of power, since the construction of a social identity is an act of power.” (Mouffe 2005: 141)

Following on from the above, Mouffe points out that a fully functional public space has to be able to accept antagonisms, since it is created through the constant negotiation and renegotiation of different – often antagonistic – points of view. Consensus cannot, for this reason, be seen as an ideal. A culture of agreement can be seen to endanger democracy, since the effort to equalize different viewpoints can potentially contribute to the reinforcement of fundamentalist tendencies and increase the growth of populist and extremist

movements (Mouffe 2009: 96). Without antagonism, there are only authoritative systems and an enforced consensus, which makes the debate and discussion that form the very foundation of a fully functioning public space impossible. Here it is important to note that Mouffe's concept of antagonism is not a pessimistic acceptance of political deadlock and stagnation. Antagonism does not exclude the possibility of utopian thinking in the field of politics. On the contrary, Mouffe claims that without utopian impulses it would be impossible to develop radical, political visions. The challenge therefore lies is maintaining a productive tension between imaginary ideals and the pragmatic management of social conditions, without resorting to totalitarian views and systems of government.

The understanding of antagonism outlined above is based on Laclau and Mouffe's development of subjectivity theory in, for example, their principal work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001). Based on the psychoanalytical theory of Lacan, they argue that subjectivity is not the equivalent of transparency, rationality and presence, but on the contrary is always decentred and lacking.[2] According to this reasoning, antagonism can be understood as the conflicted relationship that emerges in the gap between such lacking entities. Laclau and Mouffe thus argue that the concept of antagonism relates to a situation where: "the presence of the 'Other' prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution," (Mouffe & Laclau 2001: 125). From a social perspective, antagonism can be defined as the limit for a given sociality's capacity to constitute itself as a coherent whole. In summary, it can be said that with their concept of antagonism, Laclau and Mouffe seek to problematise the idea of subjectivity as an integral entity identical to the self, just as they present a critique of the idea of public space as a sphere of consensus and harmonious coexistence.

In a world of antagonisms, according to Mouffe, it is therefore necessary to view and practice in public space as a pluralistic space where divergent subject positions are not seen as enemies but as 'adversaries' whose legitimate existence should be acknowledged, but whose views can rightly be

[2] At first glance there is an apparent opposition between the decentred subject and political agency. 'Decentred' refers to the lack of a coherent subject, whereas agency is usually linked to the presence of an autonomous, demarcated subject with conscious self-knowledge and political willpower. Laclau, however, argues elsewhere that the identification of such an opposition would be a misreading, since the subject is neither entirely decentred nor a complete entity. Based on the psychoanalytical theories of Lacan, Laclau claims that our identity is based on an incomplete structure, and that we are therefore dependent on identification processes in order to to continue to act in the world.

".. the subject is partially self-determined. However, as this self-detemination is not the expression of what the subject *already* is but the result of its lack of being instead, self-determination can only proceed through processes of *identification*." (Mouffe & Laclau 2001: 55)

disputed (Mouffe 2005: 4).[3] By introducing the concept of adversaries – understood as responsive opponents – Mouffe is able to clarify the concept of antagonism productively. On the one hand she uses the concept of *antagonism* in the original sense of the word, referring to the conflict between two irreconcilable enemies who here share no symbolic space. But she also introduces the term *agonism*, by which she refers to the conflict between responsive adversaries who are positive towards each other because they share a symbolic space, but who still fight against each other because they want to understand, interpret and administer this space in different ways. On the basis of this distinction between antagonism and agonism, Mouffe concludes that having an *agonistic* public space has to take the form of a constant struggle to transform antagonism to agonism (2009: 102-103).

Agreeing on the Basis of Divisions

The idea of public space as agonistic is something Mouffe returns to in most of her work, where she consistently and persistently opposes the concept of a universal subject, advocating instead for a democratically constituted public space characterised by its capacity to embrace fundamental differences. Another bearing principle in Mouffe's work is that neither democracy nor the politically active subject exist as pre-defined categories. Instead, they are contingent, constructed and continuously interact with the multiple subject positions of public space. According to Mouffe, it is therefore necessary to develop an understanding of the subject as "a decentered, detotalized agent, a subject constructed at the point of intersection of a multiplicity of subject positions between which there exists no a priori or necessary relation and whose articulation is the result of hegemonic practices" (Mouffe 2005: 12). As this quote makes clear, one of Mouffe's central points is that subject positions are never definitive. On the contrary, they are always open, dynamic and in process - in process in the same way as any well-functioning, democratic public space should be.

This ideal is not, however, easy to achieve. As Mouffe points out, there is an inbuilt paradox in radical and pluralistic democracy in that the moment of its full realisation would be the moment of its dissolution. The resolution of all antagonistic conflicts would coincide with the collapse of pluralism. In Mouffe's own terms, democracy will therefore always be "a democracy to come", since the clash between multiple subject positions functions simultaneously as both the prerequisite for and obstacle to its fulfilment (Mouffe 2005: 8). As a result, antagonism and conflict are irremovable. How to deal with this conflict, and how we choose to deal with antagonism are therefore – according to Mouffe – the key issues those in contemporary public space need to constantly address, and to which there will never be a definitive answer (Mouffe 2009: 139).

[3] In this context it is important to note that Mouffe does not hereby argue for a public space where all viewpoints may be heard. In a given situation it can be necessary to exclude certain positions. The point is that in such instances it is necessary to make the manifestation of power such exclusionary mechanisms implies explicit, instead of attempting to represent them as a neutral and rationally based act (Mouffe 2005: 145 & Mouffe 2009: 93).

According to Mouffe's *agonistic* model, public space is a field of negotiation where different hegemonic projects wrestle without the possibility of reaching a definitive, rational and fully inclusive consensus. The goal instead is a state of *conflictual consensus*, where diversity and a plurality of opinion prevail. On this point, the agonistic model implies a difference in the political perspective, because it attempts to rethink issues of political participation and representation. It does this by shifting the focus of traditional forms of institutionalised politics to explore alternative ways for those in contemporary late modern urban societies to bring their multiple subjectivities to bear in a conflictual consensus.

In this article I have outlined a series of key positions, which in different ways contribute to our contemporary understanding of public space. In summary, one could say that Habermas and Sennett – the theorists I started with – operate with a concept of bourgeois society as a democratic, open and consensus based sphere, whereas Arendt focuses more on the public space as a territorial space permeated by power relations. This power-based understanding of public space has been further developed by Deutsche, Nancy, Laclau and Mouffe, who on the basis of poststructuralist analysis contribute with a more radical understanding of the field's particular and pluralist complexity. With her idea of public space as an *agonistic* space, Mouffe gives us a term that can function as an active, analytical concept for contemporary art projects in the complex cities of today. The term can, for example, make it possible to locate the art projects in Elmgreen and Dragset's exhibition *A Space Called Public* in a political context, just as it makes it possible to locate them in field of social interaction characterised by plurality and conflict. Using Mouffe's definition of public space as an agonistic space, the art projects realised in Munich's urban spaces can be seen as focal points for conflicted negotiations between localised, particular, multiple and heterogeneous spectatorial positions. The word 'public' here does not refer to any definitive properties or qualities of the space, but rather to a disputed phenomenon that is constantly transformed and here also displaced as a result of the politically based negotiative strategies of contemporary art. *Public* is, in other words, something we can, in a given context, choose to *call* certain spaces.

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