

Art as Minority Democracy

Pascal Gielen

Column – September 28, 2012

Precisely because that odd thing that people call 'art' nowadays is met by incomprehension, it holds the position of a minority in our society. The 'dismear' that it introduces in the measure of a culture has determined the dynamics within the art world ever since the modern era. Time and again, the idiosyncratic or singular artefact has to be legitimized. Time and again, such a thing has to prove its right to exist. Anyone visiting an art biennial or a modern art museum can easily observe how contradictory artistic voices and styles are often juxtaposed. In that sense, the contemporary art world cultivates an 'agnostic' way of being together (at least temporarily). After all, within art worlds and even within a single exhibition, a multiplicity of contradistinctions, varied cultures and conflicting visions often coexist without their constantly denying each other's right of existence or legitimacy. Artists will fight all compromise from their singular position, and although their relations within the art world are often irreconcilable, they are rarely hostile. Such an attitude is only possible – so claims Belgian political philosopher Chantal Mouffe, who set the concept of 'agony' in a political light – if we see each other 'as taking part in a shared symbolic domain in which the conflict takes place'.¹

Just as in a democratic political domain, antagonism in the art world is sublimated into an agonistic manner of coexisting. Here, however, the singular minority position is only accepted because of the argumentation upon which it rests – and for the record, this does not refer to the rationally communicated argument within the Habermasian public space. On the contrary, argumentation is understood to mean the vehicle through which one attempts to obtain public support (however limited) on the basis of an artistic gesture. Such arguments can be rational, theoretical, emotional and/or aesthetic, but they can also lie within the artistic thing itself. The agonistic democratic domain is comprised of many such lines of argumentation, which always start from a minority position. In that sense, the contemporary artistic domain differs greatly from our present liberal representative democracy. The latter, after all, does not rest upon the voiced arguments of the voter, but on an anonymous act in a voting booth with no public argumentation. In a liberal representative democracy, what counts are the numbers. The voter can go to the voting booth without ever having to answer to anyone.

Within the agonistic space of the artistic domain, on the other hand, people are allergic to a democratically chosen work of art. After all, a dismeasure preferred by the majority is no longer a dismeasure, but a measure. Within the democracy of the art world, a position for dismeasure can only be convincingly obtained through the argumentative path, or 'publicizing' the artistic gesture. This is why we could also speak of a minority democracy as opposed to the liberal democracy of the majority. Within a minority model, democracy must continually be recreated through the movement of individual voices towards a more or less broad collective basis. The essence of democratization lies precisely in that process of the non-understood singular and peculiar thing moving towards (sometimes limited) public acceptance. So it is not about having a voice, but acquiring one.

Thus a minority democracy of the singular 'art thing' might offer a few keys to a future political democracy. In a globalized world, if we are to believe political scientist David Held, no classical, republican, liberal or direct kind of democracy will survive. Only a democratically autonomous model will have a chance of succeeding.² Held is referring

here to a democracy that stimulates and organizes a multiplicity of citizens' voices; a formula that permits full experimentation with the self-governance of individuals, enterprises, citizens' initiatives, organizations and all sorts of collectives. Democratic autonomy, in other words, is a political regime that constantly stimulates and facilitates the autonomous economic, social and cultural development of a whole range of minorities. This multitude of initiatives subsequently aims as much as possible at democratic self-government. And precisely because of the multiplicity of different initiatives, these end up in an increasingly symmetrical bargaining position with states, transnational authorities, local administrative entities, citizens' initiatives, etcetera. The state or supranational political forums are merely a democratic decision-making apparatus in addition to many others. In the future, democracy will only continue to maintain its legitimacy if it makes the transformation of inequalities the keystone of its politics, according to Held. Among other things, this entails making minorities central to its policy. What's more, that very 'art thing' that is so hard to understand is precisely what reminds us that such a minority can present itself over and over again. It is always at the ready to put the majority thinking in brackets. In short, this exceptional thing is irritating because it bursts open the world of certainty again and again. This uncertainty is exactly what a political system must accept if it wants to be called 'democratic'.

Pascal Gielen is full Professor of Sociology of Art and Politics at the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts, University of Antwerp where he leads the Culture Commons Quest Office (CCQO). Gielen is editor-in-chief of the international book series *Arts in Society*. In 2016, he became laureate of the Odysseus grant for excellent international scientific research of the Fund for Scientific Research Flanders in Belgium. His research focuses on creative labour, the institutional context of the arts and cultural politics. Gielen has published many books translated in English, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish.

Footnotes

1. Chantal Mouffe, *Over het politieke* (Kampen: Klement/Pelckmans, 2005).
2. David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).

Tags

Art Discourse, Democracy, Biopolitics

This text was downloaded on February 7, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/art-as-minority-democracy