Artistic Practice and Communicative Agonism

Ms Rebecca Hartley

Rebecca.Hartley3@stu.mmu.ac.uk

Industry-based Doctoral Candidate

A partnership between Manchester Metropolitan University (MIRIAD) and Castlefield Gallery

http://www.miriad.mmu.ac.uk/
http://www.castlefieldgallery.co.uk/

Draft paper for presentation at PSA Conference, Manchester, April 2014

PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR CIRCULATE WITHOUT PERMISSION
Introduction

Using artistic practice as a lens, through which one can assess the applicability of certain theories in the field of Politics, is an under-utilised tool. This paper couples Colin Hay’s (2002) analysis of the structure-agency debate with Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990) insight into understanding artistic practice. In *The Logic of Practice* (1990), Bourdieu describes practice as a reciprocal process of top-down enforcement and bottom-up reinforcement, or the reconfiguration of norms. Similarly, Hay (2002) refines the structure-agency debate by using the semantic frames of context-conduct. Context (or structure) is: ‘the setting within which social [...] events occur and acquire meaning’ (2002: 94). Conduct (or agency) is: ‘the ability or capacity of an actor to act consciously and [...] [to] attempt to realise his or her intentions’ (2002: 94). In line with Bourdieu’s understanding of practice, context and conduct have a ‘dialectical and relational interaction [that] refuses to privilege either moment’ (2002: 134). Artistic practice is thus interpreted here as an act of conduct (or agency) with context-shaping potential.

Communicative Agonism is a re-thinking of two schools; on one hand, the Deliberative Turn (Young, 1996; Dryzek, 2002; Habermas, 1998) and, on the other, Agonistic Pluralism (Mouffe, 2000). Communicative Agonism is drawn out by analysing the artistic practices of two art collectives working in the United Kingdom, Corali Dance Company and Rocket Artists. It stresses the importance of visual language and subtle subjective changes that feed into the construction of wider social norms in theories such as Communicative or Discursive Democracy, and the necessity of an emphasis on agonistic relations, as defined in Mouffe’s Agonistic Pluralism. In addition, the paper works with reference to the notions of ‘conscientization’ (Peters 2002) and ‘coming out’ (Swain and Cameron, 2002) in the context of adults with learning disabilities engaging with their audiences.

The disability discourse in the United Kingdom has explored the difference between impairment and disability (Hambrook, no date). Recently, disability is more often defined in terms of the social mode of disability: the social barriers that prevent someone with an impairment (or impairments) from fulfilling tasks and experiences that they otherwise could, rather than the medical condition that may limit or restrict their life (Christophides, 2008). Therefore, when this paper refers to disability, it does so with an awareness of the social mode of disability without discrediting the distinction made between impairment and disability. The *Disabled People Against Cuts* movement asserts that socially constructed disabling factors are still happening today. They do so by using a constant feed of articles on their website home page which, in part, aim to highlight a reduction in the quality of life for disabled people as a consequence of external, structural barriers (Disabled People Against Cuts, no date; Wood, 2013).

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it demonstrates how artistic practice has the potential to alter social norms that govern the lived realities of marginalised individuals/groups. Second, it critically
assesses two schools of thought in democratic theory by drawing on analyses of the practices of Corali Dance Company and Rocket Artists.

**Corali Dance Company, Rocket Artists, ‘conscientization’, and ‘coming out’**

By adopting a twofold approach of non-prescriptive and collaborative performance, Corali Dance Company creates opportunities for audiences to experience an inclusive performance group. They produce performances that are creatively fed by a continual process between dance professionals with and without learning disabilities. The content and style is created by using a network of ideas within the company as a whole and aims to give audiences the chance to see an alternative view of the world. Corali Dance Company generates audiences in a range of settings: from selective invitations to gallery previews, to spontaneous performance with an audience generated through proximity in the park. This range means that they encounter people who do not necessarily have a pre-defined connection to the collective.

Similarly, Rocket Artists are a group of adults with learning disabilities who took the *Access to Art* course at the University of Brighton. The *Access to Art* course provides an environment wherein adults with learning disabilities collaborate with undergraduate Art and Architecture students (Rocket Artists, no date). The core principal underpinning this process is that reflective practice is often centred on models of reflective writing which is not always ‘appropriate’ for adults with learning disabilities. As stated by Alice Fox, Jane Fox and Pauline Ridley (2008) in the publication that accompanied their *Overalls* project:

> The interest of the Overalls project has been that it offers an alternative way of thinking about reflection – a non-linear mapping of ideas that can be layered and added to on a weekly basis, so that students can place ideas and thoughts in relation to each other than being bound by a chronological capturing of ideas [...] showing rather than telling. (2008: 7, emphasis in the original)

By visualising the process of the project rather than reflecting on it through writing, ‘students and artists hold their learning within a visual language’ (Fox et al., 2008: 6). Visual language is deemed a more appropriate form of communication for many of the artists with learning disabilities, and it is used in contrast to pedagogical norms of assessment and teaching that are tied to written or verbal forms of communication.

Upon understanding the way both companies operate, the direction of the research moved into work that had been done in the field of education. This drew out the work of Susan Peters, John Swain and Colin Cameron. Peters writes on the process of ‘conscientization’, wherein:
language becomes a cultural/political act with the aim of building self-identities, while at
the same time holding the goal of transforming social attitudes and beliefs that have acted to
stifle the cultural identities of disabled people [...]. Conscientization and critical literacy start
with the individual and a belief in human agency. (Peters, 2002: 105)

Meanwhile, Swain and Cameron analyse the process of ‘coming out’ in relation to disability:

Coming out [...] for disabled people, is a process of redefinition of one’s personal identity
through rejecting the tyranny of the normate. [...] The forms this challenge takes are varied.
They include [...] the creation of alternative cultural representations of disability through the
practice of Disability Arts. (Swain and Cameron, 2002: 76, emphasis in the original)

Both of these concepts are relevant in the light of understanding the work of Corali Dance Company
and Rocket Artists, who define themselves as ‘inclusive arts’ practitioners (Corali Dance Company,
no date; Rocket Artists, no date). Inclusive arts:

[Provide] creative opportunities between artists with and without learning disabilities through
artistic collaboration and facilitation for the purpose of challenging existing barriers and
promoting social change. (Fox, no date)

There are two main methodological approaches to inclusive arts practices; prescriptive and non-
prescriptive.

The prescriptive methodologies identify excluded participants in order to include them and aim to
work with them by choosing explicit issues around inclusion and exclusion to present to an audience.
Often, these present a range – though it may not be all encompassing - of perspectives on the given
issue. This approach is susceptible to reproducing norms around inclusion and exclusion and
reflecting them back at an already primed audience; the group/issue has already been externally
classed as ‘excluded’ in order for them to be sought out to support the formula for the work. It also
assumes that issues have a fixed and uniform impact which can be presented in a set way without
speaking to some of the more socially constructed elements as to why behavioural norms towards
disability have developed in the way they have. Arguably, this is an example of where context dictates
conduct and, therefore, reduces agency.

The non-prescriptive alternative involves exhibiting and performing art that has been organically
produced, with its roots and ideas in artists, without guiding the audience as to what their response
should be. This creates artistic content, a process, and an audience more open to the agency of the
artist, thus empowering both them and the audience. As noted by Alice Fox, director of Rocket
Artists, these processes place the ‘artist practitioner in the more radical role of collaborator or
framework holder/facilitator’ (Fox, no date). This increases the possibility for audiences to have an
unanticipated and genuine response to the work and the artists’ representations of themselves. In other words, the artists are able to ‘come out’ (Swain and Cameron, 2002). As stated by Swain and Cameron: ‘the discourse is predominantly around the labelling of rather than by disabled people’ (2002: 76, emphasis in the original). If disabled people are to shape their context, a shift needs to happen towards the ‘labelling by’. The notion of ‘coming out’ is underpinned by the idea that the labelling of oneself is a more representative, democratic and, in some cases, socially challenging process.

Both prescriptive and non-prescriptive approaches contribute to the disability arts scene; however, the second provides more of a platform for social change (without dictating that social change should be an outcome). The key difference can be found if we return to the definition of inclusive arts which denotes that inclusive arts promote social change. Yet, the approach demonstrated by Corali Dance Company and Rocket Artists does not simply promote social change, instead it enacts social change. In turn, this is an empowering reflection that could have significant implications for the contemporary debate in democratic theory: the Deliberative Turn vs. Agonistic Pluralism. This paper aims to demonstrate that this binary opposition can be overcome through an understanding of artistic practice and, therefore, highlight the necessity of including inductive analyses of artistic practice in the wider field of Political Analysis.

**Communicative Agonism?**

Because the self-representation of identity at the level of the individual is central in democratic theory, it is an example of a theoretical tradition that could benefit from an inductive analysis of artistic practice (Mouffe, 2000; Young, 1996). The core principles of democracy are that each individual’s social preferences are taken into account when it comes to the governing forces in their lives. This includes the reformulation of social norms.

**The Deliberative Turn**

Deliberative democracy refers to a process which ‘creates a public, citizens coming together to talk about collective problems, goals, ideals and actions’ (Young, 1996: 121). Focussed on a ‘common good’ rather than competition for the ‘private good’ of each participant:

> [...] citizens transform their preferences according to public minded ends, and reason together about the nature of those ends, and the best means to realise them. In free and open dialogue others test and challenge these assertions and reasons. (Young, 1996: 121)

Therefore, the citizen enters into the deliberative forum freely in order to present their view on a given issue or situation in the knowledge that their view will contribute to the overall decision made by the
group. In addition, this citizen will have the opportunity to ‘transform their preferences according to public minded ends’ as well as transform others in a guarantee of reciprocation (Young, 1996: 121).

When considering Habermasian Deliberative Democracy, Iris Marion Young and John Dryzek take exception to the rational forms of communication that Jürgen Habermas advocates. They expand communication to include narrative, storytelling, gossip and song, to name a few proposed alternatives. However, these are still tied to assumptions about language. Discourse theory has well documented the exclusionary tendencies of written and spoken language (Heller, 2003; Van Dijk, 2008), and this has been echoed by theorists writing from within the Deliberative Turn (Young, 1996). Notably, Young (1996) and Dryzek (2002) have aimed to steer democratic theories within the Deliberative Turn away from a focus on ‘deliberation’. This is due to the way it is connected to notions of rationality and, therefore, a proceduralised bias towards those better equipped to emit a ‘rational’ way of speaking.

Although Dryzek is taken by ‘discursive democracy’ (2002), Young’s use of the term ‘communicative democracy’ (1996) is more open to a visual language and less tied to ‘text and talk’ (Van Dijk, 2008: 31). Although essential differences exist between the two conceptions, what is of relevance here is that from within the Deliberative Turn theorists have accommodated visual language, even if visual language is not formally codified within their reformulation of what it is to communicate. Furthermore, the concept of a ‘transformation of preferences’ suggests the possibility for subtle, intersubjective change occurring at the level of the individual. This is well suited to the artist-audience interaction and the reformulation of social norms highlighted by Corali Dance Company and Rocket Artists. However, as Mouffe argues, the Deliberative Turn does tacitly pacify the presence of antagonistic behaviours, something that ‘conscientization’ and ‘coming out’ are heavily reliant on. Therefore, the Deliberative Turn must look to Agonistic Pluralism in order to understand how this might be accounted for.

Agonistic Pluralism

Agonistic Pluralism is, in part, centred on identity, specifically the conviction that ‘every identity is relational’ (Mouffe, 2005b: 15). Mouffe states:

[...] the affirmation of a difference is a precondition of the existence of any identity [...]. In the field of collective identities, we are always dealing with a creation of a ‘we’ which can exist only by the demarcation of a ‘they’. (Mouffe, 2005b: 15)

Here, Mouffe argues that negative identity formation, the idea that identity is always built upon what is external in order to constitute the internal, is dominant in the creation of identity. If the ‘we’ and ‘they’ come into direct contact in a way that challenges the nature of the other, antagonism must be
seen as a real possibility. It is this possibility that it is dangerous to suppress, ignore, or intend to eradicate.

Identity-based antagonism forms one aspect of what Mouffe (2005b) terms ‘the political’. ‘The political’ is, for Mouffe, ‘the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in different type of social relations’; whereas ‘politics’ refers to the proceduralisation and creation of a hegemonic set of norms and ideas that govern and mould ‘the political’. In other words, ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ reconfigure each other in a way that is comparable to Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of practice and Hay’s understanding of context and conduct. ‘Politics’, for Mouffe:

[...] is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, i.e. practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony. (Mouffe, 2005b: 18)

Here, it becomes clear that Corali Dance Company and Rocket Artists, in challenging the dominant norms and social structures, are agonistically situated in what Mouffe terms ‘the political’. However, one must question how the theory of Agonistic Pluralism actually creates change. Furthermore, how does ‘the political’ inform ‘politics’? For Mouffe, Agonistic Pluralism is about ‘profound hegemonic transformation’; people ‘need to feel that their intervention is going to make a difference’ and ‘that they have to choose between real alternatives’ (Mouffe, 2005a: 170). In this formulation of change, Mouffe does not consider how some may have limited access to these moments of ‘profound’ change. What if, for example, the shifting hegemonies consistently marginalise the same individuals/communities? Dryzek points out that Mouffe’s blindness to her tacit advocating of ‘political equality’ must be rectified. This paper argues that one way to rectify this is to analyse the context-shaping potential of visual language. Visual language, as shown by Rocket Artists, expands the platform on which those less able to comply with norms of ‘text and talk’ (Van Dijk, 2008) are able to participate.

The works of Corali Dance Company and Rocket Artists show that they are agonistic, but they are agonistic in a more subtle way. They do not present the audience with ‘real’ alternatives, yet this does not mean they are not agonistic. Therefore, although this paper generally accepts the arguments of Mouffe, they do not go far enough explain the work of Corali Dance Company and Rocket Artists to the point of audience interaction and the changing of people’s normative assumptions by the subtle presentation of, perhaps, an alternative. The choice the audience has is to ignore the alternative, or to let it alter their preconceptions. This is not a ‘real’ choice in the grand sense that Mouffe is discussing, it is not ‘profound’, yet it is still there and it is still happening. Therefore Mouffe’s theory is limited.

*Communicative Agonism*
Classically, Chantal Mouffe has set her theory of Agonistic Pluralism apart from the Deliberative Turn (Mouffe, 2000). She argues that deliberative theories of democracy (Habermas, 1998; Young, 1996; Dryzek, 2002) focus too squarely on an aggregation or preferences and, therefore, assume that preferences are aggregatable. This, according to Mouffe, is inherently connected to a promotion of rationality over “‘passions” and collective forms of identifications’ (Mouffe, 2000: Abstract); an oversight that results in a fundamental misunderstanding of the field of ‘the political’. However, Dryzek disputes the argument that the Turn is focused on the aggregation of preferences. Instead, he argues for what he calls ‘workable agreements’ (Dryzek, 2002). Rather than an aggregation of preferences, the Deliberative Turn argues for a process ‘in which participants agree on a course of action, but for different reasons.’ (Dryzek, 2000: 170). Yet, by looking at the debate through the lens of artistic practices such as those of Corali Dance Company and Rocket Artists, it becomes evident that Agonistic Pluralism and the Deliberative Turn can both be modified so that each addresses the other’s flaws in a complementing manner.

Here, we see two developments. Firstly, Agonistic Pluralism needs the Deliberative Turn in order to account for more subtle changes in social norms that emanate from a communicative process of challenging the dominant idea. But, secondly, in order to engage in the communicative ‘transforming of preferences’, the Deliberative Turn cannot ignore the Agonistic Pluralism that underwrites the necessity of ‘conscientization’ and ‘coming out’. ‘Conscientization’ is about the realisation of one’s self-formed identity and it is only in this realisation that agents can begin to see the disabling forces in their lives. Without the visibility of the them/we distinctions highlighted in Agonistic Pluralism, to ‘come out’ in an act of directly facing this would not be an option. Therefore, rather than emphasising the distinctions between Agonistic Pluralism and the Deliberative Turn, this paper shows that they can, in fact, work together in a realisation of Communicative Agonism.

Conclusion

Using the communicative channels opened up by theorists within the deliberative turn that are critical of Habermasian rational discourse, the artists of Corali Dance Company and Rocket Artists are able to activate their self-identities and use a visual language to potentially ‘transform’ the audience’s understanding of them.

This paper has sought to demonstrate that Corali Dance Company and Rocket Artists take ideas from within the collectives and facilitate the process of self-identification or ‘conscientization’ (Peters, 2002). Once the companies have incubated the identities of the artists, they then inject them into a situation described by Swain and Cameron (2002: 68-78) as ‘coming out’. ‘Coming out’ can be directly linked to the agonistic collision of the ‘we’ and ‘them’ identities present in the work of Mouffe (2005a: 15); the identities represented by the individuals with learning disabilities have the
potential to counter assumptions about them made by individuals who do not have a learning disability. These assumptions can, to use one example as argued by Disabled People Against Cuts, Scope and Demos, lead to structural exclusion and the ignoring of preferential living situations.

Although this argument advocates Mouffe’s antagonistic characterisation of ‘the political’, Mouffe’s theory leaves this paper wanting more. This is because, ultimately, Mouffe asserts that change happens through ‘profound hegemonic transformation’ and plays down minor choices made by individuals by stating that ‘real choices’ relate to the bigger issues of transformation, meaning smaller issues are classed as unreal (Mouffe, 2005a: 169). This necessitates the merging of Agonistic Pluralism and Communicative Democracy to create Communicative Agonism. Communicative Agonism acknowledges the need to recognise the antagonistic relations in Agonistic Pluralism, but reduces the problematic assumptions of ‘political equality’ and profound change. It does so by borrowing the importance of a participant’s ability to ‘transform’ another’s preferences from Communicative Democracy. With reference to Corali Dance Company and Rocket Artists, this allows for a potential and subtle transformation of imposing and disabling external identities. These could, in turn, contribute to changes in social norms and ideas about disability, resulting in the long-term reduction of the marginalisation of individual disabled people from the wider community.
Bibliography


