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On Politics, Poetics and Agencies: interview with Manolo Borja

In the next text, Manolo Borja addresses some of the ideas he discussed in an interview in Barcelona last June: changes in present-day capitalist societies, the new dynamics of participation by civil society, and the re-invention of the structures of mediation.

CO Those working in and around Toni Negri feel that the power of the present (culture) of resistance lies in the affirmation of social life, offsetting capitalism's misuse of the forces of invention and creation. How do you view the new scenarios that are springing up in the fissures that endanger “integrated world capitalism” (globalisation)?

MB Unlike other eras, in today's society it is very difficult to think in terms of an “inwards” as opposed to an “outwards”. The age of the modern *avant-gardes* is over; and just as we have gone from a disciplinary society to a control society—to speak in terms of Foucault's categories—the postmodern society (Negri's “Empire”) has managed to apprehend our own spaces of freedom, turning them into objects of control and consumption. In this new biopolitical situation, the financial and industrial powers generate needs, social relations, bodies and minds. Nothing escapes capital: capital produces goods and also subjectivities and these, naturally enough, are in turn transformed into merchandise. The political subject disappears and is turned into a consumer. And so many of our sources of growth have been symptomatically dematerialised and the communication industries have acquired so much power. They not only organise production on a different scale, they have also managed to make their justification immanent. Negri explains that the justification for the new order does not come from the large international organisations, but rather arises in an interiorised form, from the power exercised by the communication companies.

In this sense, the institutional criticism that formed the core of a lot of more traditional political art—that part which sought to reveal the underlying structure of society—is today insufficient. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello say in *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme* (another book which has been widely read among many sectors of the social movement), each new system of domination of capital implicitly bears its own critique. Thus today's labour instability is substantially related to the criticisms levied in the 1960s and 1970s: in other words its justification lies in what they call “artistic criticism”. It is not sufficient simply to dissect what power hides and set out a single and transcendental intended truth. Resistance can no longer be external to the system: rather it must be active from within this society that is organised into networks and within which we have to strive to produce exoduses and displacements. We urgently need to conceive new forms of sociability, give voice to subordinate groups and explain those histories which do not belong within the official history and which are liable to create fissures in the division of the sensitive element of our collective imaginarium.

Precisely because the Empire does not express itself hierarchically, like the old colonial powers, where a relationship between the structure at the centre and the periphery was repeated systematically, and because any area may be equally important in its contingency and its precariousness, it is possible to imagine the introduction of fissures from practices in which the unpredictability of the event and the inexpressibility of the work of art itself form the basis of the action. Obviously, at the same time these run the risk of being assimilated by capital and relaunched as new means of social exploitation. Because of that, as the postmodern narratives that they are, these practices cannot propose an emancipating finale, but rather the continuous movement and antagonism of the multitude.

CO The Internet now forms the technological basis for the form of organisation that characterises the information age: the network or set of interconnected nodes. Castells says we are witnessing an unprecedented combination of flexibility and effectiveness in the performance of work, of coordinated decision-making and decentralised execution, where transversality and horizontal working methods are becoming natural. How do you think this public space of visualisation influences the process we are describing, of creation, resistance and redefinition of the public?

MB I don't want to create a myth around the aspects related to some supposed technological revolution, nor do I want to fall into the trap of essentialising technique. However, in the political context we were talking about, this network structure is especially significant, because it highlights the discursive character of the public and involves an idea of a participative, self-organised audience, which is open to others. This is a different crowd to the one that might gather, for example, at some religious or sporting event, where there is always a component of totality and completion, related more with notions of worship or audience than with the idea of the public sphere as such. The difference resides in the fact that the "net" public is organised exclusively in relationship with the text it receives and circulates and which it has to be aware of. It forms and shares a common space in which the preestablished social structures are replaced by a series of relations organised immanently by the public itself.

In a world in which our lives run the risk of being administered down to the smallest details, I think it is fundamentally important to think in terms of a self-organised public, whose very existence is intrinsically linked to the text that makes them exist and allows them to be active. The activity of these publics is participative to a greater extent than the fact of belonging to a group and, because of that, they take the form of active agents in a social space that exists historically and in which they demand a certain authority and sovereignty. And this is how the audience can constitute civil society and, thus, a political project.

Naturally, this discursive condition of the public is not new. What is new is its capacity to act as an agency through the network and the appearance of other discursive methods, more closely linked to the poetic dimensions of the language and to the existence of different contra-publics as an alternative to the bourgeois rational-discursive system.

CO In the terms we can see now in some attitudes between resistance and creation (Suely Rolnik), what role do you think subjectivity has? From this space (outside the market) what capacities are there to create new figurations, new systems of representing ourselves? And as Toni Negri proposes in *Arte y Multitud*, what capability do you think the artistic space has for reinventing us and relating us?

MB Culture has become a pretext for social progress and economic growth. The "cultural" has appropriated art. This is not, as Adorno argued, a shelter against an alienating society. It has now become the very justification for that same society, which has found a source of income in transnational relations and cultural tourism and which has also come to understand art as a kind of social Vaseline (it is no coincidence that increasing number of artists are now working in the social sphere). With the end of the Cold War, the demand for formal autonomy disappeared. As George Yúdice recalled, it was no longer necessary for New York to steal the idea of modern art from Europe. There was a search for a utilitarian use of art, which was absorbed by an expanded system of culture. It was called on to act as an element of cohesion in the cities, while at the same time it was compelled to make up for its deficiencies, including the improvement of districts and the creation of employment. The use of culture by the

powers that be to promote a specific ideology is not new, but only in our times has a need for it been created.

The art institution handles large sums of money, represents states and enjoys a well-earned centrality. But it has to be said that this is not what we imagined. Art today serves more to maintain the status quo than as a tool for social change. It seems to have distanced itself from true political transformations. During the crises of the 1960s and 70s, artistic movements played a leading role and held the cultural and educational institutions of the system in check, but this does not appear to be the case now. There has, unquestionably, been an officialisation of criticism (the latest presentation of the Spanish pavilion at the Venice Biennale was categorical proof of this), and it is essential that there should be a development of new practices so that art can continue to be that thing that makes us better and freer. For me the work and attitude of poets and artists such as Mallarmé, Duchamp and Broodthaers continue to be exemplary. We should not forget the arguments that Mallarmé used in his time on the relationship between art and politics, and the intelligence with which Duchamp opposed the glorification and incorporation onto the market of his ready-mades, by turning them himself into merchandise, the *Boîte-en-valise*. And we should also remember the clear-sightedness of Broodthaers, who more than anyone else understood the role of the artist in a merchandised society.

CO How do you think the spaces where the work and creation of the artist have been developed to date (museums, publications, cultural institutions, etc.) will vary in form and how will they inter-relate with a view to drawing up the new cartography of knowledge, given that they are instruments which can act to build opinion?

MB In some ways, the present global situation is quite similar to the totalitarian regimes of the first half of the twentieth century. As was the case at that time, when dictators needed spectacle to produce an organic feeling of unity, today the new fascism, linked as it is to consumption and to the interiorization of authoritarian practices, also craves for spectacle. This would appear to be borne out by the ease, at least when compared to other periods, with which artists, curators (and the different groups of workers involved in this type of project, such as architects, designers, educators and others) can travel from one place to another, pick up commissions, etc. Any change, then, must necessarily involve the re-invention of our structures of mediation. Logically, the structures we have (museums, libraries and universities) are structures that match a type of bourgeois, historicist, universalising and exclusive knowledge (the false opening-up of multiculturalism has not, in actual fact, led to a new departure, since the unity of the subject remains unaltered in the container of the differences, which are only nominal differences). Much of the political art we see in the different art arenas tends to be too reliant in its adaptation to a specific model of action. It ends up being no more than pedagogy. This is why it is important to recover the poetic in the work of art; that is to say, a theory of expression that is not limited to the pragmatic nature of that which is expressed. As Jacques Rancière would say, the human being is a political animal because he is a literary animal. We need to reexamine our structures of mediation in order to recover in them the role of the artist as an agent.

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