

LEIRE VERGARA

### **Art, Possibility and Democracy. Interview with Charles Esche**

*The Irish city of Cork is the European Capital of Culture 2005. Cork Caucus was one of the activities included in the programme of events. The project involves artists, production structures, writers and theorists, and has developed into an educational platform intended to encourage conversation and debate on the collective will. The organisers of the programme: Art/Not Art, Charles Esche(CE) and Annie Fletcher, in collaboration with the National Sculpture Factory, have proposed that the cultural legacy of this European celebration should take priority in working on the specific conditions of this context.*

**LV** *Cork Caucus* was conceived as a meeting place, to be developed through presentations, *picnics*, workshops, reading groups, exhibitions and informal meetings. The concept of the *caucus* comes from the idea of an internal political meeting at which relevant decisions are made, such as choosing parliamentary candidates. What led you to choose this model for the project?

**CE** First of all, the *caucus* model ties in with our initial interest in the future of democracy. In the existing political sphere, democracy is increasingly being delimited and political discourse is increasingly being reduced. This situation is unquestionably conditioning the capacity for imagination. What we've tried to ask is whether art can be used as a place from which to create new discourses, exchanges and forms of democracy. These new structures can ignore even politics, by setting themselves up in an alternative way and targeting the actual will of the people. At the same time, the concept of the *caucus* is also based on the idea of a possible meeting between self-elected people. What I'm talking about is something that runs contrary to the idea of culture as social inclusion, or art as a common asset that has to be shared by everyone. I don't share that model of culture and I don't think art operates like that, or that the audience or people associated with art are built on those premises. The idea of the *caucus* offers the possibility of forming part of a group, of being able to choose to participate as an active member in this encounter and, of course, in an open and unrestricted way. Right from the beginning, though, we knew this project wasn't going to have a large audience.

**LV** Another reference for this meeting was the idea Joseph Beuys had in the 1970s for establishing the *Free International University* project in Ireland. What relationship is there with the model you describe?

**CE** Beuys' project highlights his own concern and commitment to the political and also touches on the initial question of democracy and different models of democracy. Beuys proposed the establishment of the *Free International University* in Dublin. This idea arose out of a romantic and mythological relationship he had with Celtic culture. Beuys saw Ireland as virgin territory, still undeveloped, where everything was possible. To some extent this was a misguided concept, but it does show his personal interest in this culture. However, because we wanted to establish a project in Ireland that would address education, democracy and art, it was inevitable that we would refer back to this example. The *Free International University* brought us closer to the specific context we wanted to work in. In any case, we didn't want to attach too much importance to it; we weren't interested in reinventing that model today because we felt the proposal itself was ridden with problems.

LV However, in relationship to the debate that has now reopened on the dichotomy between aesthetics and politics, it does seem relevant today to take up again Joseph Beuys' urgency to activate that commitment to the political. How do you interpret that debate, which really is an old issue?

CE I don't think anyone's claiming it's something new. That reflection on the development of an active artistic practice and its relationship with the political in a way that is not necessarily effective has existed since the dawn of humankind. Nonetheless, it is true that there are circumstances that in some way make it particularly urgent at this point in time. It's connected to the failure of political democracy in the last 30 or 40 years. In economic or corporate terms, great progress has been made in several senses, but political theory and practice are bogged down. In my opinion, the current situation in the European Union, old Europe, that capitalist Europe that was backed by the American bloc during the Cold War, is comparable to the 1970s in the Soviet Union. I mean, we're seeing another period of stagnation, a lack of imagination and potential in the political field. I don't know how long that paralysis can last; it's as if we were waiting for some process *à la perestroika* to happen. That crisis is simply a reflection of the lack of an elaborate, critical and intelligent discourse about Europe and the United Nations, but also about immigration, the political possibility in view of the reform of the welfare state, the concept of society. There's been no serious theorising about any of this since 1968.

LV Catherine David at her seminar on aesthetics and politics posed the concept of specificity as a tool for confronting the generic nature of this binary. Shep Steiner used the same term in the group he organised about the interpretation of Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community*.

CE I think the term is very appropriate if you want to avoid falling into the trap of generalising when you approach this debate. I also very highly value the specific, the micro, or as Lenin would say, *the concrete analysis of concrete conditions*; so I agree about the need to use examples; contingent, specific, local ones. Giorgio Agamben also referred to the example in *The Coming Community*. So one of the priorities in the *Cork Caucus* and, to a certain extent, something that we are beginning to see operate now is the *grassroots* phase; a programme of activities prior to the latest meeting, guided along by Dobz O'Brien and Fergal Gaynor, members of the Art/Not Art group throughout the year. The idea behind these activities was to work directly on the specific conditions of this city but also to take into account the specific conditions of Art/Not Art as an active agent in the project and the necessary factors to stimulate creative production in Cork. Right from the outset, we felt it was important that the project should operate for the local community of artists, and not turn into a mere injection of information. The sessions by Catherine David and Shep Steiner both encouraged *close reading*. The group Static, based in Liverpool is going to develop a project closely related to this idea; their plan is to work with the students from the School of Fine Arts of the University of Cork. There are other projects which also fall into the specificities of this place, like Bik Van der Pol's *Ford Boxes* project. But the important thing is that these proposals should have some sort of resonance in the future of the city so that *Cork Caucus* extends beyond the three week meeting itself.

LV *Cork Caucus* establishes a new binary: artistic potential and democracy, in what sense?

**CE** This is what *Cork Caucus* is really all about. The question being asked is whether it is possible to examine democracy from the field of art. In other words, how we can act collectively? Democracy is an expression of the collective will, but can we really express this with art, if we see art as being a practice which is ultimately individual and subjective? Is that possible? Might the goal of art not be simply to create this possibility; in other words, to provide the platform that expresses a collective will? Finally, what relations are established between art and democracy? In my opinion these relationships are extremely difficult, because democracy is realistic, tangible and pragmatic, and evidently art is not created from a democratic will. However, there are some reciprocal influences. Democracy is constantly interacting with art, like, for example, when it demands to know the attendance figures of museums.

**LV** So, does democracy sometimes act in a negative way on art, I mean, does it become a means of control?

**CE** I consider myself to be a dyed-in-the-wool democrat; in a certain sense, anarchy is also democracy and it's what we should be fighting for. We need more democracy. But the democracies of North Western Europe are bad examples of what I mean by the "democratic possibility". Maybe art can create new models. In the popular culture we tend to think of democracy as being a single reality, the one we are living through, but it's a process, a continuous becoming. Shep Steiner talked about this at the seminar—how in a democracy, in contrast to totalitarianism, you can cultivate actions like hospitality without them turning into threats. The problem arises when, for example in the US, it's not clear whether you're looking at a democracy or a totalitarian state. My family comes from the German Democratic Republic, so I am very conscious that democracy can be interpreted in very different ways.

**LV** You have talked about Chantal Mouffe's concept of agony in relation to this programme, and particularly to her idea of "friendly enemies". In what way?

**CE** The clearest example lies in the *grassroots* activities and the nucleus of the project. On the one hand, you have the local discourse which is directly related to the people who live here; and on the other, you have the international group. The relations between the two aren't easy, but it's a matter of a healthy tension, a healthy agony. Maybe what is going to happen here after the programme is more important than the actual progress over these three weeks. The tension is concentrated here.

**LV** What type of production have you been trying to encourage?

**CE** There are projects that have been produced specifically. So some artists like Bik Van der Pol, Phil Collins and Surasi Kusolwong were invited to produce new work. Whatever happened, we didn't want to determine everything in advance; a single room in this old disused school offers us the possibility of sparking new collaborations or encounters with students in the city. We were more interested in developing this relationship further than in producing new projects by artists.

**LV** So, *Cork Caucus* concentrates more on producing knowledge.

**CE** But also on producing conversation and active debate. This is related to the legacy of *Cork Caucus* but also to a series of issues that have been raised in the process. In other words, how can we formulate an appropriate international connection for this particular scene? How can we promote a local production process that is in turn integrated into the international scene? So it's important to create confidence in the discourse, and we can only achieve this progressively. In this sense, *Cork* is not only the

venue where the programme takes place but it also becomes a central feature of it. The project adapts to the specific artistic situation of this city and the structure we propose is generated in response to this lack of information or contact with the international scene. In my opinion, though, this type of project is like an alternative to the model of the great exhibition. Indeed, the National Sculpture Factory's first proposal was to organise a large exhibition event. I wasn't interested in doing something like that in Cork. I am of the opinion that a situation of this type generates other motivations amongst young artists. Just going to exhibitions doesn't provide the same level of experience or commitment. In this way of working we have to get involved as members of a community. I think it's important to compare this type of project with the biennials and see exactly what they can offer. I learnt a lot from the *La Cumbre-Tiempo de transacción* [The Summit-Transaction Time] project (organised by Consonni and Arteleku in 2003). If you try to over-determine everything in an inflexible way, the project may well suffer as a result. In Cork, though, we're at an introductory phase. It would be ideal if we were to hold this meeting every year for maybe five consecutive years, inviting the same people each time. The problem, needless to say, is money.

**LV** What relation do you see between *Cork Caucus* and other educational projects you have developed in the past?

**CE** *Cork Caucus* was born out of the experience of two previous workshops I organised in Seoul and Jakarta. They involved groups of artists from Europe and Asia. The idea was for the participants to have a chance to exchange ideas and to publicly discuss the way they worked with different contexts; in short, we were trying to spark another type of approach to global art; to generate other connections. Once again, we can see these conversations as forms of production in themselves; interesting projects will develop out of them over the coming months and years. This is the revealing aspect of the educational model, of the proto-academy.

**LV** This ties in with Walter Benjamin's notion of the author as a producer...

**CE** Exactly. The idea is to produce new meaning on that which you have already received. We need to encourage people to think critically.

**LV** At the same time, these structures also generate dynamics which counter the acceleration inherent to globalisation.

**CE** Obviously, I'm interested in enabling a situation where critical thought can be fed. Speed deflates critical action. Capitalism requires stupidity in order to generate greater consumption. Lack of critical thought generates more profits.

**LV** You've said on occasions that you're not interested in working geographically. You entitled the next Istanbul biennial, which you're curating with Vasif Kortun, *Istanbul*. How do you view the concept of locality?

**CE** When I say I'm not interested in working geographically, I mean I'm not interested in working with the notion of the nation state and that's different to the concept of locality. I'm not in favour of the idea of culture promoting the concept of the nation. The geography that interests me is the geography of cities. I'm not interested in the way nations forge a very concrete image of what Scottish art is, or Basque art, or Spanish art... It's important to go beyond the conditioning of the concept of the nation-state.

I'm interested in geography in terms of the specific conditions of a given place and the differences that are established between places. As a cultural intervention, an international biennial can reflect on these specificities; it can raise changes or consider

them critically. In the case of the Istanbul Biennial, we have concentrated on the specificities of the place it is inserted in. For Vasif Kortun and me this approach works in quite the opposite way to the old model of the biennial: I mean the idea that the curator travels the world in search of the best examples of contemporary art and then presents them in exotic historical buildings in the city. We started out by inviting artists to work directly on Istanbul through residences. But we soon realised that that wasn't enough because we were in danger of creating an essentialist effect. So we decided to also invite artists who were working directly on other contexts and insert their work into the city. So we managed, at the same time, to point to everything that Istanbul actually isn't, in other words to establish a dialectic relationship with the context. As in any linguistic premise, the moment you try to formulate a definition, immediately its opposite forestalls it in shadow form.

**LV** In what sense does this approach differ from other biennials which concentrate on settling on a specific place? To what extent do the expectations about the socio-political sphere of that site condition the interpretation of the artists' work?

**CE** Right from the outset, I felt it was important to work together with someone from the city. I couldn't have worked in Istanbul without Vasif Kortun. The curatorial team also included another two participants, one of whom was British but based in Istanbul and the other who was a native of the city; so the group is again based on this Istanbul / Not Istanbul dialectic relationship. This has led to a more sophisticated understanding about the city. So if you compare it to other biennials, we have tried to create another dynamic between the exterior and the interior of Istanbul. However, at no point have we tried to over-determine the status of the context through the work of the artists. We were more interested in provoking an "agonic" reaction between our interpretation of the city and the artists' own proposals. Once more the biennial empowers a micro situation through the artists' production.

**LV** I think your decision to concentrate on artists is important; in some way it reminds me of something Surasi Kusolwong said this morning: one has to trust the artists because art itself is mere illusion.

**CE** You have to believe that the artist can change the world.

*This interview with Charles Esche was held on 22 June in Cork. Further information: <http://www.corkcaucus.org/>*

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