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Imagining an agonistic museum of contemporary art

In my short talk I reflect on the ideas of Chantal Mouffe on agonistic or radical democracy in relation to museums of contemporary art. Mouffe feels that the disinterest people show towards democratic political channels on the one hand, and the success of the nationalistic and non-humanistic movements on the other, is due to a misunderstanding of “the political”. To her “the political” is not about rational deliberation between equals as proposed by Jürgen Habermas, but about “us against them”. The need of the people to build group identities through difference; passionately advocating or opposing something, cannot be negotiated away. The pain of submitting to the hegemony is in fact the power that keeps the democracy going. Agonism leads forward, because any state of hegemony is always a temporary conflictual consensus, that in a democracy will be inevitably contested. Mouffe urges us to develop ‘vibrant public sphere’ and to use our existing institutions as spaces for agonistic struggles where opposing views can clash. For her, this is the key for “mobilizing political passions towards democratic designs” (Mouffe 2000, 2005).

My question is, can a museum of contemporary art work as such a space? On what conditions could this be possible? Some thinkers, such as Scott Lash (2002), have seen contemporary or conceptual art as an important channel for social critique in the information society. But there are others, like Mouffe herself, who are more sceptical. To her avantgarde art is too much a part of the current market economy to provide any alternatives to neoliberalism. Also a state-owned museum building can be seen as a problematic site for such political struggles, as it does not easily fit the idea of free public sphere, but should rather be understood in terms of governmentality. From my perspective the process of digitalization and the internet as a platform for exhibiting and discussing art might provide some solutions to this situation. However, the internet should not be envisioned idealistically as a free public space either, but as a contested environment with strong commercial and political forces trying to dictate its future usages and changing it at a level largely invisible to the users.