Collaboration and the Conflictual

The disappearance of class identities and the end of the bipolar system of confrontation have rendered conventional politics obsolete. Consensus finally reigns with respect to the basic institutions of society, and the lack of any legitimate alternative means that this consensus will not be challenged.[1]

—Chantal Mouffe

In contrast to cooperation, collaboration is driven by complex realities rather than romantic notions of a common ground or commonality. It is an ambivalent process constituted by a set of paradoxical relationships between co-producers who affect each other.[2]

—Florian Schneider

Pity is very underrated.

—George Costanza

Any form of participation is already a form of conflict. In order to participate in a given environment

1. Chantal Mouffe, "Introduction," in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1999), 3.
2. Florian Schneider, "The Dark Site of the Multitude," in *theory kit* (http://kit.kein.org/node/1), accessed Jan. 25, 2006.

or situation, one needs to understand the forces of conflict that act upon that environment. In this context, it seems urgent and necessary to promote an understanding of "conflictual participation," one that acts as an uninvited irritant, a forced entry into fields of knowledge that could arguably benefit from spatial thinking.

In the politics of participation, it is crucial to differentiate between cooperation and collaboration as pointed out by Florian Schneider.[3] Political theorist Chantal Mouffe distinguishes between two scenarios in which the dimension of antagonism can be expressed in society: antagonism proper—the classic friend-enemy relation—and the concept of "agonism," as an alternative way in which oppositional positions can be played out. In the latter, we are faced not with the friend-enemy relation, but with a relation of what Mouffe calls "adversaries." This reading is based on the notion that adversaries are "friendly enemies": They have something in common, and they share a symbolic space. What is important in this concept is the potential to undo the innocence of participation, to point out the realities of responsibility, and expose the "violence of participation." In this context, it is useful to think through a concept of conflictual participation as a productive form of interventional practice.

Conflict refers to a condition of antagonism or a state of opposition between two or more groups of people. It can also be described as a clash of interests,

3. See ibid.

aims, or targets. When we look at conflict as opposed to innocent forms of participation, conflict is not to be understood as a form of protest or contrary provocation; but rather, as a micro-political practice through which the participant becomes an active agent who insists on being an actor in the force field they are facing. Thus, participation becomes a form of critical engagement.

When participation becomes conflict, conflict becomes space. Micro-political action can be as effective as traditional state political action. Such micro-political fragmentation strengthens what Hardt and Negri call the "multitude," a composite of multiple differences that carries with it the power of different positions.[4] They argue that the accelerating integration of economic, political, and cultural forces on a global scale has enabled the growth of a powerful network. The multitude is defined by its diversity rather than its commonalities. According to Hardt and Negri, this multitude is the key for future change and might strike just where it is least expected, and with maximum efficiency where the antagonism is at its peak. However, as illustrated in the conversation with Chantal Mouffe in this book, Hardt and Negri's theory of the multitude appears oversimplified when it comes to the global versus the local scale.

In the context of spatial practices and participation, probably the most interesting aspect of the notion of the multitude is its overlap with Italian writer and

4. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005).

political theorist Antonio Gramsci, who proposed a "long march through the institutions," by which he meant the appropriation of cultural institutions at large: the media, the academies, and the theaters. Gramsci, Hardt, and Negri share the rejection of the understanding that changes in culture come "after the revolution." All three of them recognize the importance of culture. Their "revolution," therefore, is understood as the establishing of counter-institutions rather than overthrowing the economic base: a slow transformation in which conflict is understood as a constructive model of antagonistic encounter, a means of intervention that the democratic process should be able to afford. It is through the expression of disagreements that the unexpected will be able to emerge while appreciating culture as a living system.

In July 2006, Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist interviewed more than fifty people over the course of twenty-four hours. Their first so-called "Interview Marathon" at the Serpentine Gallery in London, was set up as a model to deliver a cross-section of practitioners that, in one way or another, define what London is today. Although the event was interesting and successful in many ways, one could also sense a certain frustration among the more critically oriented audience members. Surely, one would think, if one sets out to trace some kind of cross section, that it would include a multitude of dissimilar voices. Now, in order for this not to be misunderstood, it needs to be mentioned that I am not trying to argue for a more inclusive model or one based on political correctness. On the contrary: What

was missing was precisely the conflict that "is" the city. The Marathon was set up as a "stimulating set of discussions." However, all participants were either part of an existing network of cultural practitioners, thinkers, or commentators or at least originated in the same cultural milieu.

Regarding collaboration as a post-consensus form of practice, I would like to argue that, in order to include the complexity of the city, one also needs to include the conflicting forces of that city. Consensus is only achieved through a relationality of powers. One could argue that if such a relationality were to brake, another kind of knowledge would be produced, one that helps us understand the composite realities of the contemporary city and the forces at play. Interestingly, one of the interviewees at the Marathon was Chantal Mouffe, who usually suffers from a severe angst of the middle-class consensus swarm. Although her interview session was more of a monologue than a conversation, it revealed probably the most important point of the event: Because today's networking culture is based on consensus rather than conflict, it merely produces multiplications, but rarely new knowledge. As Mouffe argues, "To recognize the constitutive role of power relations implies abandoning the misconceived ideal of a reconciled democratic society. Democratic consensus can be envisaged only as a 'conflictual consensus.' Democratic debate is not a deliberation aimed at reaching 'the one' rational solution to be accepted by all, but a confrontation among adversaries."[5]

In this context, it could be useful to rethink

the concept of conflict as an enabler, a producer of a productive environment rather than as direct, physical violence. Conflict does not have to register as a physical force. A more diverse set of conflicting voices could have potentially been a risk for the turnout of the Marathon. However, it would have allowed multiple agencies and discourse that, through the recalibration of vectorial forces by means of critical conversations, could have produced alternative and unexpected knowledge: "[...] in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated, nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse."[6]

In order for any kind of participation to reach a political dimension, the engagement needs to be based on a distant critical voice. Through this kind of "conflictual participation," the exchange of knowledge in a post-disciplinary field of forces starts to produce new forms of knowledge. As a starting point for such a model of "conflictual participation," one could make use of the concept of collaboration as opposed to cooperation that Florian Schneider distinguishes in "Collaboration: The Dark Site of the Multitude":[7]

5. Chantal Mouffe, "Introduction," in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, op. cit., 4.
6. Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), 93–94.
7. Florian Schneider, "Collaboration: The Dark Site of the Multitude," op. cit.

"As a pejorative term, collaboration stands for willingly assisting an enemy of one's country and especially an occupying force or a malevolent power. It means to work together with an agency or instrumentality with which one is not immediately connected..."[8] Since such a notion of collaboration is also based on an idea of the inside and the outside (if you're inside, you're part of an existing discourse that is to be agreed upon and fostered), it will increasingly be "the outsider" who will manage to critically add to pre-established power relations of expertise. Although the outsider will be understood as someone who does not threaten the internal system due to a lack of knowledge of its structure, it is precisely this condition that allows one to fully immerse himself in its depth in a dilettante manner. What we need today are more dilettantes who worry neither about making the wrong shift nor preventing friction between certain agents in the existing force field if necessary; we need a means to—as Claire Doherty calls it—"circumnavigate predictability."[9] It is this dilettantism that might enable us to enter more productive modes of collaborative engagement. In this sense, the critical production beyond disciplines could be interpreted as the temporary abandoning of one's own specialized knowledge for the benefit of entering an existing discourse through the access point of curiosity. Through specialist

8. Ibid.
9. Claire Doherty, "The New Situationists," in *Contemporary Art—From Studio to Situation* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), 11.

non-knowledge, but highly specific targeting in terms of a will to participate in a given environment, system, or discourse, such curiosity engenders exploration, investigation, and learning; it allows for a forceful injection of external knowledge that is alien to the system one engages with.

Schneider describes the notion of teamwork as something that often fails because of often banal, internalized modes of cooperation that are characterized by the opposite of sharing knowledge: "In order to pursue a career, one has to hide the relevant information from others. On the other hand, it also refers to the fact that joining forces in a group or team increases the likelihood of failure much more than the likelihood of success. Awkward group dynamics, harmful externalities, bad management practices are responsible for the rest." [10] Schneider interestingly stresses the fact that there is increasing evidence that working together may also happen in unexpected ways. In such a regime of practice, the individual members of, for example, a work group—in which they are usually conditioned to pursue solidarity and generosity—are being exposed to a more brusque method of collaboration, a mode where "individuals are relying on each other the more they go after their own interests, mutually dependent through following their own agendas." [11] Cooperation should be understood as the process of working side by side, in agreement rather than in competition. Collaboration

10. Florian Schneider, "Collaboration: The Dark Site of the Multitude," op. cit.

11. Ibid.

is a process by which individuals or organizations work together at the intersection of common goals. This can be adversarial, joining forces to generate a surplus, although the stakeholders' goals might be opposing. In order to clearly distinguish between modes of cooperation and modes of collaboration, Schneider introduces cooperation as a method applied between identifiable individuals within organizations, whereas collaboration articulates a more disparate relationship generated by and based on heterogeneous parts, which are defined as unpredictable singularities. In contrast to an organic model of cooperation, collaboration is being put forward as a rigorously immanent and illegitimate praxis.

This notion of course connects to the concept of the outsider, as well as the need for a more conflictual mode of participation from the point of view of self-initiated practice versus the more established model of the service provider: "Cooperation necessarily takes place in a client-server architecture [...] Collaboration on the contrary presumes rhizomatic structures where knowledge grows exuberantly and proliferates in a rather unforeseeable fashion."[12] It is this collaborative structure that presents, according to Schneider, the most fertile site of revolutionary potential. It is where change can occur, frameworks of difference can flourish, and the creativity of the multiplicity can generate productive practices.

Collaboration often produces actors who work on projects for something other than a purely mon-

12. Ibid.

etary exchange or the accumulation of cultural capital. It can also be described as a productive learning process. In the book *In Search of New Public Domain*, Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp characterize what they call a true public domain as an experience in which there is interplay of friction and freedom, as we temporarily but frequently come into contact and enter the parochial domain of others.[13] It points to the fact that, if you set up a situation in which people can produce what they believe in, this condition can produce a set of relationships and productivities that take the situation further than the conventional understanding of disciplinary or interdisciplinary practices. The logic of change is always based on the notion of exception, while unpredictable acting is the enabler for something "new" to emerge. One could argue that the autonomy of the art world produces an infrastructure for this. In such a context, opposition can be read as affirmation, and whether boundaries retract or expand, they set up the limits of potentialities.

The concept of using conflict as a generator of critical and productive collaboration was first introduced in conflict theory. There are very formalized political, transnational, and non-governmental structures and procedures in place that utilize conflict as a strategic tool, in order to both reveal realities and generate a crisis, which allow for change to occur more rapidly. The United Nations practices a number of conflict strategies in which micro-conflicts are

13. Maarten Hejer and Arnold Reijndorp, *In Search Of The New Public Domain* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2002).

superimposed onto existing situations of conflict in order to deal with the source issue. This concept of introducing other conflicts falls within what is officially called "conflict transformation theory," which is strongly influenced by Johan Galtung.[14]

To return to the notion of collaboration, it would thus not be farfetched to argue that conflict could be understood as a productive variable within collaboration. It points to the larger question of how we think of challenges and change. Conflict is not necessarily a given. It needs to emerge and needs to be fostered as a generative friction, a force of critical production. However, as introduced earlier, such conflict should be understood as one that is neither physical nor violent, but a friction that emerges on a content and production level, a conflict played out within the remit of the democratic arena. Acting within this arena produces reality. In this context, those who do not act, but stand by as spectators, do not participate and simply confirm existing paradigms of

14. Galtung is currently the director of Transcend, an international peace and development network, seen as the pioneer of peace and conflict research, and founder of the International Peace Research Institute (PRIO) in Oslo. Galtung also originated the concept of Peace Journalism, increasingly influential in communications and media studies. Over the past forty years, Galtung has published ninety-five books and more than a thousand articles on the operations of conflict. Interestingly, Transcend also promotes codes such as: "Even if electoral democracy and individualist human rights are good for you, they might not be for others." This is interesting precisely because Galtung has developed the concept that is widely known as "structural violence." Here, conflict is understood not as a means of provocation, but as an idea of prompting change through the operational collision of interests that produce new meaning and practice, a means of productive and operative change.

practice. The culture of antagonistic collaboration could also be described as an urban, rather than a rural, practice. Density allows for antagonisms to emerge more naturally. The space of performativity is a space of reaction and encounter, in which there is an intrinsic relation of what Chantal Mouffe calls the adversarial, of "friendly enemies." What they have in common is that they share a symbolic space. They agree on the ethico-political principles that inform the political association, but they disagree about the interpretation of these principles, a struggle between different interpretations of shared principles. In a similar manner—excavating the dynamics between friend and enemy—Jacques Derrida, in *The Politics of Friendship*,[15] applies the use of difference to the concept of friendship. Haunted by the provocative address attributed to Aristotle—"my friends, there is no friend"—Derrida illustrates that there is a play of difference associated with the concept of friendship. He does not have to problematize the concept of friendship, as it is already problematized by its very own history: In its essence, friendship is marked by difference. Between friend and enemy, as well as friend and friend, there is the potential for a conflictual consensus, one that produces the fertile ground for conflictual participation to emerge.

This allows for the politics of participation to be redefined by a productive difference, inserted as friction. Critical practice is supposed to challenge the expectation of what things should be and how they

15. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 1997).

should be done. Knowledge is necessarily shareable and occurs after there is a common ground, even if that shared ground is conflictual. If art is political in defining ways of being together and reshaping common ground and how it emerges, then—as Tom Keenan remarks—"art clearly can be and in fact is a mode of research in the political."[16] Art is "doing" politics not through modes of representation, but through practice. The moment of the political is when agency is assumed, when one becomes visible. Almost by default, this raises a problematic: Someone on the outside needs to recognize it as political. Therefore, the relationship between practice and distribution and the question of how to address and present, become imperative. It is important to understand that architecture can never deliver solutions. However, what it can do is visualize and spatialize the conflicts that are the reality of the very nature of its context; in fact, even more so considering that these conflicts are disappearing from our visual registers. Consequently, architecture becomes a mode of witness testimony.

One should therefore argue that, instead of breeding the next generation of facilitators and mediators, we should encourage the "uninterested outsider," the "uncalled participator" who is unaware of prerequisites and existing protocols, entering the arena with nothing but creative intellect and the will to provoke change. Running down the corridor with

16. Tom Keenan quoted from a Centre for Research Architecture roundtable presentation and discussion on March 24, 2006, Goldsmiths College, London.

no fear of causing friction or destabilizing existing power relations, he opens up a space for change, one that enables "political politics." Given the increasing fragmentation of identities and the complexities of the contemporary city, we are now facing a situation in which it is crucial to think about a form of commonality, which allows for conflict as a form of productive engagement: a model of bohemian participation in the sense of an outsider's point of entry, accessing existing debates and discourses untroubled by their disapproval.