

## Artists and agora

I'm not sure if Hannah Arendt was a genius<sup>1</sup>, but whatever is decided : her work deserves to be read by artists. And in particular by artists reflecting their role and responsibility in society. Here a brief example of her thoughts in order to show you how I come to recommend that.

Fortyfive years ago, in 1958, Hannah Arendt observes the “artificial conformism of our mass-society” and “its enormous use of material goods”.<sup>2</sup> “No longer is the world considered as something we all have in common”, she diagnoses. It “has lost its power to assemble us”. It is no longer experienced as that in-between-space which connects and separates all those who share it. The loss of the world's power to assemble, “seems, in its spooky quality, like a spiritualistic seance, in which a number of people assembled around a table, is suddenly, and through some magic trick, faced with the disappearance of the table in the midst of them, such that two people sitting opposite each other are no longer separated by anything, but are no longer connected by anything either”.

Against that loss, Hannah Arendt seeks to revitalize the notion and the practice of the public space, the *agora*, so it were. And this, I believe, is what – consciously or not – many artists do: they re-create public spaces, spaces for communication.

The *agora* ( from *gr.* assembly) was the center of civic activity in old greek city states like Athens, a square surrounded by public buildings. It was the basis and physical manifestation of what we now call “the public sphere”, a place which invites people to come together and talk to each other, talk, argue, agree, compete, show and see the world they share.

But why would, in today's world, artists be the ones who create such a public sphere? Aren't there news agencies and mass-media, parliaments or political forums who do just that? And very effectively, so it seems...? Here I come back to Hannah Arendt, to what she writes about our mass-society and how she distinguishes the unity it constitutes from a very different type of unity. The unity of our mass-society is one of conformity to common denominators and their average value. It reduces every human being - a being which is not only equal, but also similar and different to/from others<sup>3</sup> - to one scale (and often a monetary one). The unity created in the public sphere is of a different kind. It's order is not given (and not given/determined by an invisible authority “above”), but one that is always in creation, always in process of organizing itself: it is used and contested, confirmed and modified in the very network of communication it establishes. The unity of the public sphere, of the *agora*, is a unity in/of “going along together”. Hannah Arendt describes how it unites human beings not inspite, but because “every one of them occupies a different place in it and the position of one does not coincide with the position of any other”. The quality of this unity stems from “the fact, that everyone sees or hears from a different position”.

I think that artists create spaces, which create this kind of unity. They provide them through works, which allow for -, contain -, and provoke different views. Work that contains

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<sup>1</sup> See: Julia Kristeva (2001): Hannah Arendt. Columbia University Press, NY.

<sup>2</sup> This and the following quotes from: Hannah Arendt (1981, orig. 1958): Vita Activa. Piper, München.

<sup>3</sup> For the replacement of the dichotomy “equal – different” through the trifold structure “equal – similar – different”, see Eva Meyer's text on Hannah Arendt in her book: Tischgesellschaft. Stroemfeld/Nexus, Basel, 1995

tensions and is opening up categorizations rather than categorizing. Such work becomes a ground on which the unity of a public sphere can unfold, it becomes the *agora*. In other instances, artists create works which cannot only be seen and surrounded, but also be entered physically, sat down or lived in.<sup>4</sup> Here the metaphorical *agora* becomes actual, the metaphorical “table” becomes a real table, one which carries an atmosphere that invites people to come together and promotes a discourse between different positions.

Thus, I believe that artists can promote an opposition to the unity of mass-society and to the politico-administrative and economic logic behind it. And in providing space for an active unity of heterogeneity, artists can also promote an opposition to all those who try (and even if with best intentions) to create unity by declaration, by de-finition from above. They often use nature- or organism metaphors to rhetorically support their claims and legitimize the unity they made up. Against this violence of, what Hannah Arendt calls “extending to a communal dimension what is in fact a personal position”, artists can support the plural unity of the *agora*.

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<sup>4</sup> I also consider the experiential space of performance to be something like this.