**‘After the Archon’ talk given by Ben Cranfield at *Public Programming? Pedagogical Practices in a Missing Europe* at Middlesex University, July 2016.**

As I am writing this, I am about to take part in a ‘Storm’. This is – how shall I call it – what name will not already circumscribe its possibilities – an artwork? An event? A performance? A collective endeavour? A leap of faith, perhaps? A gathering? An orchestrated, yet open, collectively-authored – materially-practiced action? Institutionally speaking, it is a part of a public programme – part of the Utopia season at Somerset House – a celebration and reflection on the idea of Utopia upon the 500th anniversary of Thomas More’s publication. The ‘Storm’ is created by artist duo ‘Fourthland’ who describe their projects as ‘bringing together inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural groups working with performance as process, object making, sound and collective space, focusing on tactility through embodied learning and handheld knowledge.’

As I write this I am on the cusp of the strom – by the time I am saying this it will be after the storm. Will anything have emerged or changed? Will I know more or less about the space that this kind of intervention opens up? Will I be more or less sure of the value of a space that is not already foreclosed by entrenched narratives or professional practice or formal learning?

This is not the first storm and it will not be the last. However, two weeks of storms, atmospheric, political, social – makes the questions posed by this Storm uncanny – what comes out of chaos? How do we take responsibility for the space of the storm? How do we move in the storm – do we pull together or become more fragmented? Should we move with pragmatism or idealism?

On Monday I visited the space, ‘The Utopia Treasury’, with its wall curtains designed by Jeremy Deller, now contrasted with Fourthland’s untimely interventions: mysterious bundles, foetal and material, roughly hewn and textured lying in the space waiting to be handled. Objects and structures that belong to a different time and no time in particular appeared to have specific functions that were as yet unapparent. A table invites a group. At the centre of the table a crude staff delicately laced with waxed string and topped with an animal-liked waxed form is marked with the word ‘epicentre’. Presiding over the space is a piece of overworked cloth – rigid with layers of accretion – strung taught. This is the “cloud” from which the storm will precipitate – doubling up as a projection screen for a chaos of images from London’s myriad building developments, inhabitants and power-players.

I will have a role during the storm – I will be a kind of scribe – part of the group of ‘observer-participants’ who will both make the storm and will apprehend and record it. I will write words as I over-hear them, or as they pertain to particular actions or gestures, on two textured, homemade black boards, until the white chalk makes them illegible. In the post-storm discussion we will see if these words have resonated with the group, if they have stuck in minds and helped comprehend the storm, or if they need to be over-turned or replaced.

Whilst my role is part of the ‘Storm’ it is also a part of an on-going performance that I am undertaking with Fourthland titled ‘After the Archon’. After the Archon is the name I have given to a series of exchanges I have had with Fourthland over a period of year. The exchanges are an exploration of how to create a shared space through the iterative transformation of fragments – what I will refer to here as an ‘archive’ of collective/collected experience.

I want to briefly see the ‘Storm’ through the lens of three different theoretical positions and to draw these positions together into a proposition for what sort of space such pieces of public programming might open up.

First lens:

The founder of the Roundhouse, or rather, the founder of a project that preceded the Roundhouse, was playwright and Trade Union activist, Arnold Wesker, who, in 1968 spoke of his ‘fear of fragmentation’.[[1]](#footnote-1) For Wesker, fragmentation was the defensive and reactionary elevation of the fragment to totality. Here a political slogan, an errant fact, a single observation, or a particular image, gets elevated to the status of truth and is used as a defence against the complexity of things. For Wesker, the elevation of fragment to truth is a pernicious process of inwardness, which gives rise to “easily assimilated notions and truths of marginal value; and from them we produce tiny angers with which we self-righteously reassure and comfort ourselves and tyrannise others.” [108]

Wesker went on to explain that “My fear of fragmentation is at the sight of a kind of global cannibalism; a nightmare in which terrified defenders of their fragments devour each other, and there is no peace.” [109]

What Wesker was arguing against was not the fragment itself, not the apprehension of the fragmentary nature of the reality, nor the fragmentary archive of historical recollection, but, rather the defensive foreclosure around the fragment, as an exact refusal of its fragmentary form. This foreclosure could happen at the level of identity, or pride, or heritage – with perhaps a positive sense of empowerment, but always also, with the potential of violent defence or arrogance. In difference to this process of what we might call, false synecdoche – misrecognising the part for the whole and the whole for the part - Wesker proposed a ‘process of *collecting* fragments together which *hint* at the truth’.

Second lens:

A footnote in Derrida’s archive fever – where he claims that ‘effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.’ Note that it is not just the archive’s openness which is crucial to democracy, but its very manner of formation and the possibilities of meaning making that it opens up. Access alone does not guarantee democracy. Indeed, as both origin and law, the archive places through its mnemonic structures, whilst placing what is in it through an authority it guarantees. There is an inherent duality to the archive, as Derrida unfolds it, that preserves and destroys, liberates and fixes, cures and pathologizes not alternatively, but simultaneously. It is not, it would seem, possible to do without the archive (to do so would be to live in a myopic present, with no space for shared reflection) but, equally, it is not possible to avoid its overlaying, obscuring and authority.

My third lens is Chantal Mouffe’s 2013 *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. Facing a Europe already in crisis – with protest on the rise – Mouffe asks what sort of political space is needed and is possible. Looking at examples of direct-democracy and, what Mouffe calls institutional ‘exodus’ models, she questions their long-term viability on two account. Firstly, she sees the exodus model as ineffective in changing the institutional reality where political power resides. More crucially for Mouffe, deliberative democracy, whose aim is consensus, she sees as both impossible because of what she terms the ever presence of ‘radical negation’, but, also ontologically apolitical, as, for Mouffe, politics is the battle for hegemony. There is an irradicable ‘us’ and ‘them’ inherent in the political. As is well known, the space that Mouffe advocates for instead is an ‘agonistic’ space – a space that doesn’t not attempt to deny either difference or dissensus, but provides a context within which agonism does not descend in to antagonism and violence. As is also well known, Mouffe gives a special place to art practice within her thesis and clearly sees art practice and the art institution as spaces of potentially exemplary agonistic practice. How, exactly, art creates the necessary conditions for agonism it is not clear, but what is clear is that for Mouffe the practices that are agonistic, counter-hegemonic and non-antagonistic are those that take the form of what might be loosely called ‘socially-engaged’ practice. Whilst there are many ways of disagreeing with Mouffe’s political ontology, what interests me here, is how the practices that Mouffe champions relate to her other contestation, drawn from the work of Jonathan White, that agonistic space, such as a truly political European project would be, requires a cultural bond, beyond a commercial (trade) bond.

Drawing these different problems and topics together – how might Wesker’s fear of Fragmentation relate to Mouffe’s agonistic space and Derrida’s notion of the archive as origin and authority?

Wesker’s feared fragmentation is a form of archive fever, in which a fragment – a fact, a myth, an experience, a document, a slogan, is elevated to the status of totality and truth. This is archiviolithic: it destroys the collective space of the archive, as a bedrock of democracy, in the name of defensive violence that wishes to secure the cultural space for its own name – be it professional enclosure, economic exploitation or hegemonic control. But, Wesker’s fear is also Mouffe’s – that glib moves towards consensus are built on a fragment of reality – a not full comprehension of the connectedness and difference of experience.

However, despite Mouffe’s objection to an unrealistic idealism on the part of those, such as Jurgen Habermas, who advocate for an ideal speech situation in which the conditions of consensus can be reached, Mouffe’s position is not necessarily any less idealistic. How, after-all, is the cultural bond that she sees as necessary for the possibility of agonism to be established – from where does it come? Perhaps it might come from the archive whose two main structural metaphors – home and tree – suggest the possibility of not just placing and stasis, but of nurturing, growing, sheltering and re-placing. Might the dialogic, affective qualities of certain art practices that Mouffe champions, produce a form of archive that its shared in its constitution and interpretation and, as such, productive of a cultural space that is neither homogenised or owned, but, ripe for agonistic engagement?

So what of the space of the Storm? I imagine this to be a space not without structure, not without direction, not without authorship or without vertical structures of memory. One in which the possibilities of collective agency and collective inheritance are not foreclosed. What is left after the storm – its traces, its archive – is not its exact record, nor is it owned as a truth belonging to the artists or the group, rather it is a shared place of reflection that will be taken away to form the basis of other spaces, private and public. I imagine this not as an idealised space, but rather an exemplary one that holds uncomfortable feelings, different positions and responses within a structure that then records through material traces a collective experience, reflecting rather than obscuring different position and position-takings. What is left is not a common bond, as much as a shared ground upon which other re-collections can occur. Yes, what is left after the storm are merely fragments, an archive of sorts, but this is not an archive through which people can be fixed in place, nor with which an exclusive totality can be formed, rather it is an archive that can only be activated through further collective actions.

After the strom, its traces will be packed up and carried away by its participant observers. The arefacts and archives that existed before the Storm will have been transformed – a transformation that will be carried forward by Fourthland.

Fourthland travel from project to project with bundles. These bundles contain fragments - objects that are both the site and trace of a pervious collective actions – when they are asked by strangers what is in the bundle, they invite those who are curious to open the bundle and to handle the objects. And so the archive is transformed – new significations are created and the ground shifts.

It is such a space that I see as the potential of a public programme – not an ideal discursive space, nor a space of absolute self-erasure, nor of didactic authority – but one that, in Wesker’s phrase, gathers together to hint at the truth. The gathering of fragments can never result in a totality or a singularity, but it is from fragments that we are led towards re-collection.

1. Arnold Wesker, *Fear of Fragmentation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970). The volume contains five of Wesker’s lectures, one article and one letter all created between 1960-8 – they all concern the development of Centre 42, the role of the artist in society and the organisation of the arts. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)