

Divergence and agonism: the different, the other, and the one who disagrees.

Cultural communication and democracy in Scotland.

Gesa Helms, Leigh French, and Lisa Bradley
(and the Variant Editorial Group)¹

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“Democracy is not a system of government,
but the always conflictual and disruptive
manifestation of the principle of equality”.

*Jacques Rancière, ‘Democracy Today’, 16/10/2012
University of San Martín, Buenos Aires*

Introduction	2
Part 1: Intent and methodology	4
<i>Communication: Literacies, competencies, and publics</i>	8
Part 2: Articulations on organisational form and communication within the (wider) visual arts	9
<i>Nine Articulations</i>	10
Part 3: Taking and voicing position: cultural policy as a means of furthering democracy?	13
<i>Taking position in communicative networks</i>	13
<i>Cultural democracy as practice and principle</i>	15
References	21

Introduction

This document is based on a study conducted by the collaborative arts/media project Variant over the past year into forms and practices of communication, principally within the contemporary visual arts of Scotland's cultural sector. The document is concerned with the institutional impact of communicative forms, strategies and competencies on the democratic practices and concerns of those whose work effectually constitutes the sector. Put more principally, it concerns such impact on the ways one perceives and conceives of the possible positions to occupy in daily experiences within this field. That is, the interrelationship of politics and aesthetics in how what is visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable, audible and inaudible connects with how we can understand our roles and modes of participation, ways of doing and making the world (Couldry 2010).

It is precisely these relations which mark out communication as political.

We understand *communication* to refer to a wide array of how social agents (i.e. individuals coming together in a variety of forms who share a common social setting or field) engage in communicative and other cultural practices. These involve the public circulation of symbolic material, such as in the arts, and take place through institutionally mediated spaces of cultural and political representation – such as those demarcated by Creative Scotland. It is this critical relationship between *communication* and *representation* that is of concern to us; in how this relationship opens up or forecloses democratic possibilities for the making and unmaking of complex tastes, interests and subjectivities through spaces of public deliberation (Barnett, 2003, 2004).

While Variant's approach to this study is influenced by discussions surrounding *contemporary visual arts*, the study takes a more conciliated approach to the tangled interrelations of activities and agents than the prevailing divisions of art form categories through which culture is governed.

The study was part-funded by Creative Scotland's *Communication and Engagement* budget and arose out of a series of discussions between the Editorial Group of Variant magazine and Creative Scotland between 2013 and early 2014. These discussions related to Variant seeking clarification from Creative Scotland over funding criteria and decisions with regard to Variant's prior applications, leading to a complaints process that centred on the transparency and accountability of the institution in the making of funding awards. As Variant's Editorial Group, we were trying to take seriously the statements made in relation to decisions not to fund the magazine and questions that arose from this.

In this, we at once pursued long-standing concerns of the magazine over public interest, accountability, and transparency in such processes of cultural governance,

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whereby the processes of interaction and decision-making among agents (including different scales of institutions, and leading to the (re)production of social norms) are co-ordinated. We are also attempting a different form of direct engagement and discussion with a number of people working within Creative Scotland.

The concerns we identified from these discussions and which underpinned our subsequent proposal to Creative Scotland for this study focused on:

1. the existing conditions for communications in the (visual) arts in Scotland, in artists' collaborative organisational practices (such as 'DiY' artist-run spaces), and to conduct such situated research from a position within the study field itself. This includes how such practices have been impacted upon by changes to cultural governance structures and policy attentions in Scotland (such as the focus on Creative Industries), and how practitioners have come to understand and articulate these changes as the conditions within which they practice.
2. the communicative forms, strategies and competencies in such self-organised visual arts practice in Scotland and (as far as the limits of the study allow) the UK and internationally. Using a dialogical research process to consider more specifically how:
 - a. particular approaches to communication (such as Variant's publishing and other projects) might facilitate practitioners in reflecting on the social, political and economic complexity of their environment; the wider question being the extent to which self-organised forms facilitate an understanding of these complexities and who other agents for such facilitation and intervention are;
 - b. issues of cultural infrastructure, the conditions for a plurality of communication practices, with particular reference to those who foreground their organisational form (as artist-run projects do), affect and are shaped in the context of Creative Scotland's aim of cultivating and sustaining a 'cultural ecology' (Creative Scotland, 2011);
 - c. the pace of technological change affects artistic production, reception and exchange – something which holds further implications for who is able to attain public voice.
3. the manner and extent to which a discourse of 'sustainability' surrounds collaborative organisational models, acknowledging the experiences of Variant and other self-organised forms, so as to enquire into:
 - a. why these differing forms (and the individuals and groups involved with them) share a concern for collaboration in how they organise and how this is expressed (be that in public space, a publication, a discussion, a workshop, exhibition, performance, reading, symposium, event or otherwise);
 - b. how these forms position themselves in relation to a Creative Industries approach;
 - c. how these positions inform and relate to collective capacities for political action.

Having set out the origins of this document, the main body of it contains three further sections. Section 1 introduces our intent and methodology for the study and how this provides the basis for the report. Section 2 discuss our own intention for communicating this document, as well as a number of aspects of how these intentions have informed the methodology of the research study as well as our own practice. Section 3 concludes the main body by drawing together arguments around the literacies, competencies and publics of communication.

At the centre of this document, in Section 2, we report on the study's findings in a series of substantive positions over current forms and practices of communication and organisation across the visual arts. These statements also then lead to a repositioning and reclaiming of position, role and purpose that we see Variant to have in the field of communication, cultural democracy and organisational form. Our reasoning behind choosing this particular form of a position paper to report on the study is introduced in the earlier section and more fully developed and theoretically underpinned in the last section of the document. Articulating our position as the Variant Editorial Group (as authors of this document, co-collaborators throughout the study, and agents within the field under investigation), we consider the 'taking and voicing of position' to be involved in the process of communication. Doing so, we also consider some of the core challenges faced when taking a position and the implications of this for authoring a 'report'. We introduce the concept of cultural democracy as a cornerstone for how we understand our own role and position as an argument for what is at stake in cultural policy at this moment in time. In this, we draw out agonism (a conception of politics as contestation rather than negotiation) as the democratic principle that constitutes an important component of cultural democracy and introduces a process of communication and debate that underpins our own position-taking within the field study.

Section 1: Intent and methodology

Two insights arising from having conducted the study need stating at the outset. These, on the surface, may be unexpected as the focus of a newly published report, but in fact inform the remainder of this document. These insights are:

Firstly, that we are reporting on matters which are not unknown: we are certain that the processes, practices and positions discussed here are not network secrets.² It is knowledge that is held in common but often remains unstated. This 'leaving unstated' raises a series of concerns, which we lay out in this report alongside an investigation as to why such knowledges remain unstated. These concerns and reasons, then in turn, may be less well-known.

Secondly, the report articulates particular understandings and positionings within a hegemonic field. That is, this field seeks to withhold those alternative readings and positions that in turn want to discuss, question, or contest. The report is thus an extension of the work Variant has undertaken with individuals and organisations

2. In fact, they are the premise on which these networks operate - we later discuss this as *network protocols*.

for a long time. Conducting this study has provided us with further insight into the articulations of communication and organisational form that too often leave us, as Variant, alongside other like-minded (even if that means engaged in constructive criticism) projects and individuals, in being absented, marginalised or dismissed as ‘unprofessional’ through procedural constraints that shape the ways in which we communicate with one another, share cultural experiences, and inhabit spaces in common.

Following this study, we have some certainty that what others deliberated with us and what we write about here can also be dismissed. The articulated concerns, and the artistic and political perspectives which link questions of society, meaning and aesthetics, can easily – in the process discussed above – be treated as peripheral by dominant communicative channels and processes of representation. This report can be called into question over what are taken to be, or indeed are, its assumptions, its methodology, choice of interview and conversation partners, its style, its content and its positioning.

We are proposing something other than the governing of the allocation of public resources between different ‘taste communities’ that passes over implied issues of power; or the protection of a pre-existing plurality-of-sorts based on acceptance of a parity of esteem for normative aesthetic values and tastes. Neither do we treat communication as a mechanism to abolish disagreement and (ant)agonism. Instead, this study addresses the discursive space for cultural expressions of social emancipation and political contestation. It does so whilst asking whether notions of cultural democracy and equality in cultural provision are at all able to counter some of the problematic tendencies of cultural policy and practice encountered during the study.

We are seeking to make a document to be discussed, debated and contested in a culturally democratic manner; one that will also make visible some of the organisational and communicative dilemmas that many experience (as witnessed through this study). Moreover, we are keen to articulate the need to take these concerns seriously in the light of their implications for the existence of agonistic dissensual public space and thus the enactment of cultural democracy – as a framework for a politics of difference (a more equitable dispersal of political authority), however problematic any of these terms around an active polity may be. Our sense of the current polity and its trajectory is that, for the forms of cultural governance we are witnessing, such a fairly basic notion of democracy already poses a serious challenge, and thus is deserving of our attention. This also facilitates considering its potential role in how to be able to articulate these concerns.

While we consider the issues raised here to be known – or, at the very least, knowable – the modality of discussing them in conversation was marked throughout the study by a need for confidentiality and anonymity. While what commonly remains unstated does not generally hold the status of a secret, its relative absence required a more attentive and careful form of dialogue, e.g. involving a frequent checking back of meaning and extent of detail between us and our conversation partners. This has left us with rich research material that is tagged with different degrees of confidentiality. These degrees

range from; being there to be published in entirety with a naming of the interview partner, to the odd omitted sentence, to that which is not to be published or quoted at all. These modalities of fieldwork proved fruitful for understanding the means by which communication occurs frequently within the field. At the same time, it also meant that those of our participants who did want to be visible in their practice and position did not remain so. This is a conundrum in two directions, and poses questions for a future approach: firstly, how to allow for a varied approach towards anonymising and naming different actors within the field; and, secondly, what are the wider implications of voicing a preference for either within a field which so strongly relies on individual visibility, as the arts generally do?

So, we have settled on a particular approach for this report in how we are to speak and write about the ambivalences of extensive empirical research, and how are we to protect those participants in discussions of it. Seeking a continuation of the individual and group conversations that we had begun with public forums and individual meetings, and in seeking different formats and contents for a debate of this material, the main and first preparation is this report. It has grown from a two-page position paper to something much longer, introducing and contextualising our position, our working concepts and practices, so that it also serves as a background to our findings. It also presents a, nonetheless laborious, compromise of sorts for not generating a networked archive that explicitly joins these arguments up to existing initiatives as well as to debates taking place elsewhere (the references intruding through this document stand in as place-holders). This compromise arises out of the familiar, but nonetheless no less difficult struggle over spending time and resources when not knowing where to find the surplus to do so – i.e. the precarity of much of our labour under self-employment, and access to funding that rarely allows us to fully fund our own labour.

The research design of this study consists of three interrelated strands of empirical research. Firstly, an analysis of existing projects, materials and writing. Secondly, a series of research events with individuals and groups (as conversations and public forums). And a third strand that involved the Editorial Group itself so as to reflect, analyse and develop our own communicative and organisational form. The overall study was thus established as co-research in the sense that we, the Variant Editorial Group, embarked upon a study that not only involved an object of study out there, but very much considered us as agents (individually and collectively) within the study field itself (Malo De Molina, 2004; Colectivo Situaciones, 2003; Strickland Distribution, 2013). Here, co-research – akin to its related Participatory Action Research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) – employs an iterative model of a learning cycle where theory is developed following a process of action and reflection. Key to pursuing such positioned research is acknowledging the unique insight gained from the position of the researchers within the subject field: a knowledge and insight not attainable through other methods. Also, acknowledging the situatedness of any research position, this research is able to reflect and integrate the productive nature of any enquiry: it does not assume that researcher and field are separate entities but attends to the already existing interaction between and among researcher, participants, and the wider field. It similarly

acknowledges, and puts this insight into practice, that no research starts with a 'blank slate' but indeed starts from somewhere, at a particular time, place and position, and with – at least at the outset – a direction.

From such a position, the key method employed has been one of conversation and dialogue: acknowledging existing connections and building on these as a way to gain and share insight through a conversational format that does not construct the research participants as passive suppliers of information but instead as partners engaged in an exchange. The attendant ethical considerations and the concerns over the nature of the material thus generated are embedded, e.g., within established forms of feminist qualitative research methodology – see particularly Ryan-Flood & Gill (2013) on the implications of secrecy and silence in this field. A further cornerstone for our methodology has been the concept of a 'defended subject' - a psycho-socially constituted self that expends significant time and energy in fending off anxiety-inducing social interactions (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) – as pertinent for understanding how individuals are navigating their notion of embodied self and subjecthood in a complex network with complex forms of communication, as laid out above.

We approached potential interview partners from across the field of cultural practitioners in the visual arts, purposefully seeking out individuals ascribed different career statuses within this field. One of our guiding criteria was that we were seeking those who had extensive experience with practices of self-organising and self-institutionalising, as it was with regard to this organisational field of the arts that the pressures around our earlier identified concerns were at the fore. We were also intent on investigating and testing our own experiences with those of others in the field – i.e. to take seriously the positioning and practice that Variant has pursued over the years and to contextualise this further. This involved a number of choices, e.g., we did not seek out practitioners solely through their engagement with membership-based organisations, as to us this form is in the main an expression of trade association rather than an interest in organisational form as constituent of one's practice as such. With some of the larger 'prestige associations' such as the Scottish Society of Artists, Royal Society of Watercolourists, and the medium-specific studios/workshops being membership-based whilst also positioned close to access and resources, such a broadening would also have occluded some of our concerns over access, position and voice. Yet, by the very nature of their ubiquity across the (visual) arts in Scotland, most of our participants were also active in membership-led organisations and provided insights into these in relation to the study.

In addition to the interviews, the fieldwork also included numerous informal conversations with existing and new colleagues across the field. These often took place spontaneously, e.g. when attending events on the topic that took place during Summer/Autumn 2014. As part of our research design we developed a facilitated framework for two public events and ran these in Glasgow and Aberdeen with a total of 25 practitioners from across the visual arts in the Central Belt and North East in Spring 2014. We also developed a co-research methodology for three sequential Variant

Editorial Group meetings in Spring/Summer 2014, to investigate the themes in their relevance for our own individual and collective practice, e.g., the current organisational form of the Variant project and our ongoing developing of a sense of commitment, form and potential future orientation.

The study material thus generated was analysed by a variety of means and techniques established in the qualitative social sciences, notably 'grounded theory' coupled with a more holistic reading as Hollway & Jefferson (2000) propose. Insights, arguments and models thus generated were debated among the core study team to feed into the identification and formulation of distinct insights arising from the materials. Thus, while acknowledging our own situated starting point, the study moved along a reiterative (and not entirely sequential) line of:

fieldwork > analysis > debate of first findings

> positions within the field > our position within the field

This process made it clear to us that for our report a series of position statements would most adequately reflect the study's findings of the field of (contemporary visual) arts and culture in Scotland and its structures.

Communication: Literacies, competencies and publics

Continuing on from these questions over method, we want to begin by setting out a series of observations concerning literacy, competency and the charge as to 'difficult' or 'complex' writing and forms of argument, i.e., the particular type of method and writing that we have pursued and are still pursuing as the Variant publishing project. Once we unpack forms of communication, in particular writing and text production as a field in which Variant magazine has been strongly involved for the past thirty years, we observe that there is no such thing as a transparent language or form of communication situated outside of history, power and inevitable struggles over meaning. When responsibility and obligation are together attributed to those who voice a position as to whether their cultural expression has clarity for a 'general educated public', a misrepresentation based on a number of presuppositions are involved (Giroux, 2010). Conflating accessibility with clarity, the underlying accusation is that, e.g., a writer or artist is either unwilling or incapable of connecting 'difficult' knowledge and expertise to a larger abstract yet (nationally) authentic public. A generalised literacy and experience is imagined as the standard by which to gauge the success of access. Such success is frequently synonymous with a populist commonsense appeal (one that often takes place within a nested institutional pursuit of legitimacy), where ideal readers or audiences should be able to effortlessly engage with affirmative ideas and taste statements; frictionless encounters which are entertaining and in keeping with modes of market consumption – i.e. an exercise in hegemony, reconciling such definitions of reality as the sensible way of encountering and perceiving the world.

And yet, analysing complex social relations requires us to account for their complexity so as to render them with precision and accessibility (Thomson, 2015). Any burden of responsibility on the reader for critical analysis and reflective thought is undercut. Such a construction of clarity, in governing the conditions for modes of intelligibility,

condemns the democratic necessity for difficult reading, complex language, sustained focus and thoughtfulness. The public it constructs is seemingly unified (omitting multiple, temporal publics who read differently and often in divergent ways), suppresses questions of context (who reads what under what conditions), and eschews any vestige of critical thought or willingness to struggle with meaning.

Such misrepresentations are countered by not assuming any potential public to be too indifferent so as to struggle with language and meaning or difference; and by challenging (without insulting) a public to assume some responsibility for its engagement, and having the capacity for thoughtfulness and engaged debate.

This imperative for clarity poses a problem for civic engagement and democratic practice in what it permits and forecloses, and through doing so it subverts its apparent basis in ethics. It does so through refusing to give unfamiliar or contested positions equitable and sustained hearing, and by inviting a public ‘to deskill and depoliticize themselves by diminishing their capacity for reading the word and world critically, simultaneously placing themselves in positions of subordination’ (Giroux, 2010). By restricting the development of multiple literacies which allow people to speak across and within different maps of meaning, it exacerbates the very problem clarity is claimed to address. Delegitimising potential encounters of thoughtful debate and inevitable struggle over meaning constrains the capacity of publics to participate politically as critically informed citizens.

This accusation of a lack of clarity establishes a simplistic binary, asserting what is deemed complex or clear. The relationship between language and power is thus redefined in primarily strategic terms, while obscuring the normative power now embedded in these linguistic constructs and the political motivations that sustain it. This process is also able to define professionalism as allegedly commercially neutral, disavowing a politics. The result is an anti-intellectualism that circulates as a protectionist tool within constructions of authentic publics. Such an assumed public is not actually a public at all but a construction of the transitory populism of policy targets. Attacks on complex language as merely ‘jargon’ are based on the suspicion that any criticism – as agonistic practice – runs counter to notions of virtuous civil conduct of this authentic whole. The importance of language and communication as theoretical practice originates, to a large part, from their informative and transformative potential.

Section 2: Articulations on organisational form and communication within the (wider) visual arts

The second part of this report takes the form of a position paper, and centres on a series of concerns; each articulating a particular type of relationship between organisational form and communication.

These articulations address four larger and overlapping thematic blocks:

- a. The means and processes by and in which communication is generated, resourced and maintained within the field of study (with implications beyond it).
- b. Concerns over the organisation of work and opportunity, which set out how

- individuals are becoming discursively constituted and organised within the arts as workers (but often without pay) via internships, through training, notions of and beliefs as to inferiority, etc. At the centre of these articulations we find, in forms of identity and subject constructions, questions over how such individuals are understood to relate to wider organisational structures: loose groups and networks, institutions and organisations, communities and wider society.
- c. The (re)structuring of the governance field of arts and culture in Scotland: implications and conditions for organisational forms and communication.
 - d. The meanings and values which are at play in these interactions between organisational forms and modes and means of communication. In this, we pay closer attention to how particular organisational forms are constituted, resourced and privileged over others (the latter being bracketed out), and the means and modes of communication this is constitutive of and by which they are constituted.

Nine Articulations

1. Public debate in which diverse and divergent positions are expressed and set in relation to each other is largely absent in the field. We see the reasons for this as lying in the often extremely precarious positions of individual and group access to resources which support (and so shape) society's communicative channels. Support which is based on attributing (civil) values, conceived of as legitimate, to communicative utterances – taste statements in which self-regard, or 'getting on' – is inherent to such conformist virtue signalling. In this, fear over loss of network access motivates against voicing opinion that is not supportive of the dominant perspectives of cultural and political power. A renewal of symbolic hierarchies and codes of civil authority are accepted and validated in these processes (Bourdieu, 1984; Balibar, 2009). In order to pursue personal advancement and avoid any potential negative evaluation that could restrict access, one in effect becomes obliged to perform and so internalise modes of strategic self-presentation or impression management.³
2. Another reason for the absence of divergent positions lies in the view that anything that doesn't express full support is considered 'political', and, perhaps curiously, judged morally, as 'washing your dirty linen in public'. Any disagreement is often sought to be addressed in private, e.g. in the management of individual client relationships. The latter gives rise to the notion of there being a 'right' and 'wrong' place for politics – which can either be a displacement, foreclosing the possibility of politics, or the projection of an absence of politics onto the field itself, i.e. such 'politics' treated as an external contaminant to an otherwise desired harmonious 'ecology'.⁴
3. The absence of agonistic public debate is accompanied by a retreat towards personal, private and informal forms of exchange and encounter in the field (relations which seek to conceal their own mutual embroilment in the leveraging

3. The effect is one of a 'spiral of silence' (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

4. For a critique of vegetational concepts in management theory, see Yuill (2011).

of power). Knowledge, views and thoughts circulate between individuals, taking the form of sharing or protecting secrets, gossip or tittle-tattle (often being awarded a respective moral judgement). Positions and arguments, consequently, rarely take agonistic form and thus cannot come to be generative of wider, more open debates as interventions into defined political struggles. To us this presents the most significant problem with current policy processes (the means by which policy objectives and approaches are identified, selected and implemented) as a key space of the production and enactment of cultural democracy. That is, a public space for such formative democratic encounters is largely absent, and continually absented, within existing social practice. When conflict does emerge in public, it has tended to reflect how judgements of taste are related to the social position of agents as associated with struggles for distinction within the field.⁵

4. Creating a mythology of culture is an active, and highly resourced, day-to-day aspect of governance. One of the key myths in circulation today centres around the concept of a productive ‘cultural ecology’ – where all aspects of production and consumption are portrayed as integrated, each necessarily supporting the other, or are recognised only insofar as this is the case. For the visual arts, this still includes such international validations as those claimed through super-curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist’s 1990’s ‘Glasgow Miracle’ (Papastergiadis, 2010), which reifies leadership roles whilst positing an assumed ladder of career progression within the narrowly defined field. As socially constructed myths (Yanow 1996) – rather than merely calling them, more neutrally, ‘stories’ – these shape and structure how social relations and cultural practice are rationalised and envisaged. They also allow for hiding the conflicted nature of actually existing forms of interactions and networks, notably privileged networks of interest; the obliged acceptance of dominant forms of taste as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1980). In all this, “ ‘[c]ommunity’ is never simply the recognition of cultural similarity or social contiguity but a categorical identity that is premised on various forms of exclusion and constructions of otherness” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p.13).
5. Promotion constitutes a key discursive genre in which communication takes place in public. An internationalised ‘creative industries’ policy script (Tretter, 2011) has more strongly pulled culture and the arts into the sphere of economic development. Scotland’s growth-oriented ‘single purpose government’ of ‘building economic potential’, as expressed in the statutory formation of Creative Scotland, provides the foundational principle and yardstick. Within the cultural field, this economic rationale encounters individuals whose working practices are situated within a highly precarious set of relations. Under such conditions of precarity, favourable opportunities continually need to be generated, seized and always assumed. Interaction is often, if not always, shaped by these economic concerns,

5. Distinction used here as a stratification along lines of behavioural norms for conveying prestige, differentiation, authenticity, belonging (Sayer, 1999). For the ‘stooshie’ of 2013 over the re-organisation of Creative Scotland, see Stevenson (2014, 183), who noted that ‘It is also worthwhile considering the regularity with which many of those perceived as “legitimately” speaking on behalf of the “cultural community” served to highlight the unity of opinion that existed’.

- engendering forms of communication that struggle not to have to perform (primarily, or at least as an afterthought) to the promotion of individuals, works, projects, institutions or locations at any one time.
6. Organisational forms in which debate, not premised on an already assumed consensus of purpose or 'ecology', can take place are under increased pressure to articulate themselves through and in market models. These models rely on and reproduce promotional forms of communication and behavioural practices. Furthermore, individuals' abilities to participate and contribute to self-organised forms have become more limited with the erosion of the state welfare system that previously underpinned these relations. Articulated in the context of an 'explanatory' frame such as an ecology of creative industries, non-promotional forms are at best sidelined and designated as training grounds for a flexible labour pool, if not bracketed out altogether. The ecological metaphor masks the influence of governance, lending an air of naturalness, organicity and self-realisation to these processes. Governance, in fact, serves as a means to devalorise much of the activity that takes place within it – e.g. artist-run spaces are 'stepping stones' to a career as a 'real artist', an apprenticeship for entrance into 'professional' art making. Particular forms of practice and being together that developed in one set of economic and political conditions may acquire a very different significance in another context. What was at one time a form of 'free' self-activity may later become a means of exploitation.
 7. Social organisation figures in the field almost entirely in relation to 'getting on' in opportunity networks – as 'professional development' needs and demands. Thus unbounded, everything organisational – in fact social – is turned into a terrain for 'professional development' while boundaries between life/work and sociability/friendship and career advancement blur and disappear. The social has increasingly turned into a mere opportunity for seeking individual advancement. At the same time, an ever stronger focus on 'professionalism' is able to detract from decreasing resources by placing the onus on individuals (and their supposed lack of skills, track record or natural talent) for getting on (or rather not) (Helms, 2010).
 8. The protocols that circumscribe organisational form in setting network composition and standards include and exclude different political actors, issues, and procedures. As a political process on the part of its ad hoc authors, these protocols can and do actively foreclose debate – not least, an analysis of these very networks and their production of power – in that this architecture sets the more significant conditions for interaction; for access to network participation (communication) and for the protocols of the network (through which we pursue communication). This is extenuated in the presence of networks of production and power where actors with uneven access are able to exert disproportionate influence. These network conditions leave potential network actors little choice but to either accept or abandon expressing their agency and interest through these encapsulations of variable practices, thus foreclosing any meaningful options for discussing alternatives and therefore closing down any space or role for an

agonistic political process.

9. The institutional discourse shaping culture (and so the visual arts) in Scotland, after years of state intervention, has been thoroughly transformed – if that is a neutral term to talk about neoliberalism in practice, with actors in these networks (who are both simultaneously autonomous yet highly constrained) proactively pursuing the heightened competitive tropes of globalisation such as the Creative Class or City or a Global Market Place and its attendant claims for mobility. The array of subsidiary, nominally arm’s-length, organisations that are tasked with delivery, accreditation and promotion of a ‘cultural economy’ is vast and supported by further *ad hoc* or ‘pop-up’ consultancies, think tanks and institutional aggregations (Valentine, forthcoming). The governance mechanisms in place – which convene the protocols so as to regulate the interactions of social actors in these networks – are often opaque and struggle to demonstrate accountability. Combined with structural cuts to earlier state welfare models of service delivery, these dynamics of defining the agendas and qualities of engagement in network interaction act as a dampener on the democratic process in the field: be it over public interest, transparency of interests and decisions, or over the spaces in which democratic participation isn’t already foreclosed in gestures of consultation (Massey, 2005; Power Inquiry, 2006).

Section 3: Taking and voicing position: cultural policy as a means of furthering democracy?

Let us unpack some of the implications that these positions have for speaking of, with, within and outwith, as well as for participation in the wider field. For this, we firstly turn towards the processes of taking position within the networks before we then discuss our reasons for premising this study on the concept of cultural democracy and discuss in detail what this approach entails in relation to the positions formed above.

Taking position in communicative networks

Any utterance in the public field of culture involves the taking of a *social position* on behalf of those who voice it. Doing so, we perform or trace a particular quality of social experience and relationship. And, like an intense feedback loop, these social relations exert palpable pressures, setting effective limits on experience and on action. So a position implies something which can’t be neatly bundled up in isolation but is socially entangled in what and how it emerges (as well as again dissipates). That is, to be known and placed in relation to one’s own communicative practice but also to those of others. It is always a position within a larger social field, in relation to others. As such, we are constantly shaping and being shaped by such processes. Such ‘discursive subjectification’ (Barnett, 2010) attends to the narrative creation of specific realities and organised meanings within the discursive framework of culture. In this we are however also ‘led’ by the circulation or *flows* of affective exchange and what we *feel* to be at stake in our tracings (Clough & Halley, 2007).

Taking a position, and subsequent processes of how such a position is (and/or is

not) recognised by others, is thus also an embodied communicative act. It shares the characteristics of affective and emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) – the type of work conducted to elicit or negotiate people's emotional responses, and thus establishing an affective relationship as part of the communicative act. These processes of position-taking and position-recognising as both affective labour and processes of identity construction lie at the heart of this study.

We found the field of study to be criss-crossed by social and organisational networks of interest, or affective environments comprised of status groups, which form a sense of their own fluctuating collective identities. Within these, agents evaluate internal and external distinctions of status in pursuing their own precarious legitimacy.⁶ Identifying and unpicking some of these lines of positioning, recognition and construction has been a key challenge for this study.

The difficulty of taking and voicing a position (and thus openly engaging in a democratic process, as we explain below) is something that the Variant Editorial Group are familiar with in our understanding of Variant's history and chosen, as well as ascribed, roles. The extent and degree to which this difficulty permeates and is highly constitutive of the public field of culture, including its private manifestations, became apparent (again) throughout the study. It manifested in the way the fieldwork could take place around participants' concerns for confidentiality, anonymity and their vulnerability.

The common response from within Creative Scotland, and others who work to maintain hegemonic positions in order to orient the behaviour of these networks and those engaged within (Lazzarato, 2012), has been to frame this complex problematic of difficulty in taking and voicing position as a normative matter of aesthetic quality or individual competency alone: 'if you were only good enough..., competitive enough..., if your art was only better... Which, even if it were, still raises questions of criteria in judgements of taste; who decides (shapes and unifies) what competence is; the processes by which to exclude, regulate, or attach significance to creative labour as aesthetic practice? The echoes and reverberances of such entrepreneurialising behaviour within a dynamic field of obligations and affects – i.e. the ways in which those engaged in the field are (un)able to situate and position their selves and their actions alongside those of others, and the kinds of subjectivity such a field engenders – has made the task of 'reporting' more intractable than anticipated: who was reporting to and for whom?

How is the (material and intellectual) power of certain groups continually activated and able to determine what counts as 'legitimate' for a network? That is, what are the hegemonic processes of setting ('programming') the behavioural rules of interaction in a network – the processes of control by which subjectivity is (re)produced; articulations which inscribe their structural logic on their human 'components' in a structuration of (political) life? Rules that have been written, and are enforced, by specifiable agents

6. A social stratum sharing a lifestyle or occupation, possessing similar levels of prestige among the bases of societal inequality. Groupings which use common status identities to gain access to resources, privileges, and entitlements and defend those they already possess.

(including institutions) to serve particular ends. The key question raised by network theorists (Stalder, 2006; Castells, 2000) is that if networks are (re)programmed by social agents within them, how is this done and what are the conditions under which it takes place? Their answer is that relations of power operate through the dynamic of *threat* and the practice of *exclusion* rather than through overt repression or coercion. The ability for doing so is by means of the network 'protocol': a code of desired conduct made immanent in the network itself – a set of behavioural norms constituting the quality of the network engagement, regulating the conditions of access and interaction for social agents. Agents, formally independent of one another, who want to 'run' on the network have little choice than to adhere to this etiquette or protocol, as outside of this shared protocol the network doesn't exist.⁷ The protocol structures the social space, enabling the agents to constitute, through their interactions, this space as a network. Therefore, some of the most significant decisions are taken at the point of defining these network standards – the specifics of setting the network architecture itself. Standards and decisions are themselves political processes which constitute the ways in which issues of power, political struggle, and cultural notions of the self are inscribed within networks. This struggle over hegemony (whereby a synthesis of economic, political and moral ideas become dominant and pervasive throughout society (Gramsci, 1971) describes something other than governing the allocation of public resources between different 'taste communities'. The logic of hegemony constitutes society always as political construction; including some interpretations of social relations and excluding others (different political agents, issues, and procedures) whilst inscribing its particular reading over others' layers of experience.

One of the challenges of this report for Variant lies in identifying its conversation partners, discussants and audiences; those who will make use of it. Given the challenge of public positioning outlined above, these agents often remain submerged within the field and are not easily identifiable. Similarly, positions may shift, be temporary, and agents may occupy multiple positions at once. This also makes it difficult to find a shared form of address, a register, and how to decide on inclusion and omission of theoretical as well as empirical detail. As a position paper, this report thus remains a living document of work in progress. It is also an ongoing process in so far as the report is debated throughout its writing, filtering into other events and discussions as well as being informed by these. This also accounts for the rather extended writing process of this report, with its current version already having been widely discussed. In turn, it contributes to further informing Variant's role and (self) positioning. The decision to introduce, define and refer to a series of arguments, positions and practices which we have found outside of Scotland, and which, alongside our own, we welcome discussion of, is for us part of this process.

Cultural democracy as practice and principle

In this final section, we want to make explicit some of the concepts – such as *agency*,

7. This 'personification' of capital, the multiplication of agency and de-reification of power is not to deny capitalism's 'operation of a social form' (Noys, 2014).

cultural life, *cultural democracy*, and *cultural policy* – that underpin our position; doing so for purposes of transparency, but also to articulate further still the context in which cultural policy operates, as well as to address the ambiguity of register and audience that we just mentioned.

All aspects of *cultural life* result from human *agency*, our capacity as agents to act in and on the world, or as Barnett puts it: the ability to affect ‘spaces of sociability and spaces of decision through which democracy as a politics is made and unmade’ (Barnett, 2003, p.196). Furthermore, such agency considers humans to be willing, intending, experiencing subjects; the active subject in any specific historical conjuncture, acting with intent on social processes where meanings and values are constitutive practices which animate us but exceed us as individuals (Williams, 1977, pp.128-212). Cultural life is thus not fixed in nature nor scale but a construction, and so always subject to change; i.e. we *can* affect (make and remake) these constructs. Cultural life is also not contained to a sector or to a form of activity. As an all-encompassing sphere – both in idea and in matter – culture is invoked in how our political systems operate, in the kinds of audio-visual communication that are supported, the built environment, how we are housed and transported, and the entire array of activities that are part of human life. To participate in the world, we need to recognise the ways in which cultural life sits across the social. Only then can we begin to voice and affect the matters that concern the qualities of our lives; the multiple factors and influences which shape and impact upon ourselves. In short, this is one way of coming to register how culture constitutes a public interest.

Cultural democracy emphasises that we (as a polity; a politically organised ‘community’) must somehow be engaged in sustaining this agency; that cultural life itself should be subject to democratic decision-making processes. In this, cultural democracy is a dynamic concept concerned with societal decision-making over culture as public policy. Cultural democracy incorporates access to the means of cultural production and distribution as something to inform cultural policy approaches. It is a way of articulating the responsibilities for a democratic cultural policy through a more equitable political authority; the recognition and inclusion of difference in determining the directions that cultural development takes. And it seeks to extend these principles of justice, liberty, and equality to the widest possible set of economic and social relations in overcoming obstacles to realising democratic public life (Giroux, 1992).

At root, *cultural policy* in its concerns for governance is about creating active public spheres (the co-presence of multiple agents) and stimulating democratic participation in them; i.e. the development of citizenship around public interest. In practical terms, this means assuring more than fair and equitable access to cultural resources and support, but also equipping people with the power to pursue and to participate in political decisions that affect the quality of their and others’ lives. This identifies culture as a sphere in which people are brought into dialogue – and one that is therefore concerned with the ways we generate, communicate, access and process information.

Liberal political democracy is premised upon the existence of civil society and socio-economic pluralism; ‘choice’. Cultural policy stands as an essential public commitment

in realising these conditions. We consider cultural democracy best to be understood as a threshold for civic involvement: to enquire into the extent to which civic literacies are realised within a social context; what forms of public-interest dialogue and participation are realised which are not limited to hegemonic value judgements and the support of such.⁸ It is attendant to the fullness of cultural citizenship, which brings people into the social sphere enabling them to face each other and enter into dialogue through models which recognise the substance of conflict (Azoulay, 2012). It provides a framework for struggles to be carried out democratically, taking into account the rights of an individual to act against their cultural roots/ routes and against the effects of hegemonic positions. However, it does not succumb to the reductive view of it being a mere process of negotiation between discreet conflicts of interests.

Cultural democracy re-articulates utility: in that cultural policy isn't justified solely on the grounds that culture is a good-in-itself (an "art for art's sake") but rather that cultural innovation yields other direct and indirect public benefits by enquiring into active political agency and the intellectual, affective, civic and ethical understandings of our roles as agents. Agents acting with intent on the social world – where the social world also informs their intentions and practices.

While this may resonate with the educational development of the general citizenry, as a continuity of the enlightenment tradition, cultural democracy does in fact stand in contrast to the *democratisation of culture*. The latter focuses strongly on providing access to cultural works – most notably museums and increasingly galleries, whose role is shaped and perceived to function in similar ways – for the 'civilising value of the arts'. The assumption being that some aesthetic expressions are inherently superior to others. Democratisation of culture is thus a top-down (elitist) approach that promotes certain forms of cultural programming which are deemed to be a public good. In so doing it tends to ignore and exclude cultural expressions and practices outwith dominant or national canons (e.g. historic patrimony or the national identities of peoples).

Nor is cultural democracy about establishing an 'equality of opportunity' for variously identified social groups to consume publicly financed, organised and disseminated cultural activities (with a redemptive focus on opportunities for personal improvement). The objective of cultural democracy is to provide for a participatory approach in the definition and provision of the cultural life of the social world: not protecting and promoting cultural diversity, but the right to democratic participation in cultural life.

As a dynamic concept, cultural democracy is concerned with the manner and extent to which agency is restricted or safeguarded, allowed or disallowed, encouraged or removed from day-to-day life.

Agonism as the taking seriously of the productive or generative role of conflict is central to cultural democracy and provides the concept with which to make sense of social

8. For example, to what extent can a dialogue function that is not limited to the well-explored limitations of social media: where the performance of network- and peer-based support is almost the only form of 'dialogue' that exists; the voicing of critique and divergent positions are rare and often dismissed as trolling (Hogan 2010, Liu 2007).

interaction within political life. Agonism, thus, provides an approach to consider democracy as centred on contestation, a theory that emphasises the positive aspects of political conflict as being generative of change – as well as the significance of an ethics of *dissensus* – as a means of attending to divergence and difference, to that which governance otherwise excludes.

Dissensus cuts to the heart of a dispute over the social space of and for politics itself, and is thus more than a conflict over interest, opinions, or values. In these interactions of political conflict, dissensus opens up alternatives in political decision-making by making visible an occluded position to an interlocutor who is thus required to see and hear the argument they ‘normally’ have no reason to.

Why is this the case? Because doing so enables us to seek an understanding in the (re) making of one’s culture and, thus, one’s notions of self: ways of creating and holding open possibilities and spaces for democratic struggles against domination, injustice, and inequality, for re-thinking the relation between freedom and obligation, notions of citizenship, rights, and democratic community (Kester, 1999, 2004, 2006; Bishop, 2004, 2006; Papastergiadis, 2008; Charnley, 2011).

In attending to these different qualities of social experience, cultural democracy makes visible how social practices are organised in communicative relationships. That is, the mediated organisation of the social relations of knowledge within which institutional and discursive political practice occurs.

In this, the texture and quality of social relations are the focus of an ongoing struggle to expand the democratic possibilities of public life; a dissensus that does not abolish political conflict but rather provides democratic relations of communication for public encounter and deliberation. In doing so it points in the direction of a liberatory project, one that strives towards relations of equality and autonomy rather than hierarchy and command (Weeks, 2007).

Yet, fostering interaction across differences does not absolve authority through a commitment to open dialogue. Such a reparative depiction of dialogue – projecting dialogue merely as an afterthought once a ruling has been made – is in danger of emphasising understanding (projecting consensus as an achievement) without addressing the actual basis of divergent (and legitimate) perspectives and positions.⁹

So we argue that a politics premised on dissensus is important as it is such a politics that can challenge a premature consensus which inevitably closes off and fixes meaning. It is where divergent positions can be taken and held; where excluded groups’ disputes can attempt a reconfiguration of “the distribution of the sensible” as a condition of implicit rules and conventions which police what it is possible to apprehend by the senses. Literally, the condition of possibility for perception, thought, and activity; ways of doing and making (Rancière, 2006, 2009, 2010). And where a false clarity of the

9. It is a rejection of the Habermasian idea that politics consists of a rational debate between diverse interest groups that can occur simply through the lifting of social barriers and exclusions whilst ignoring actual material conditions (Habermas, 1998; McNay, 2008).

10. On “professionalisation and skills training as a response to a perceived organisational crisis” see Forkert, 2009 p23; and Merli, 2005 p143.

sensible's explanatory power, as a "police order" which attempts to delimit forms of inclusion and exclusion in a world of belonging, is reconfigured so that this certainty of coherence of power in society may be disrupted.

In this, a cultural democracy that draws on dissensus is not employed as a benevolent or dispassionate alleviation of conflicting ideas through competing skills of rhetorical persuasion. It does not seek neutralising nor erasing the political, nor does it substitute what is a crisis of democracy for one of bureaucracy.¹⁰ It is not to disappear the antagonisms of the social, economic, cultural, and political centres of power in establishing a space of 'negotiation and translation'. It is not the accommodation of pluralism to a 'common culture'. Agonism is not about a pluralism cleansed of the discourse of power, struggle, and equity, nor a mechanism to abolish disagreement or antagonism time and again.

At the same time, there is a tendency within agonism, as cultural democratic practice through which to enact conflict, to favour a 'taming of dissent', specifically in relation to Chantal Mouffe's pluralistic agonism (Mouffe, 2000, 2005, 2013; Crowder, 2006; Žizek, 2006). We are critical of these approaches in which conflict tends to be reduced to one of mere perspectives and subsumed in the question of communicative competency, to be overcome in a political process; one of overcoming the imbalance of power in the recognition of difference alone (Fraser, 1993, 1995, 2000). Nonetheless, in the context of this report and the absences it addresses, agonism and its generative role of political conflict is indispensable in being the very core of the political, and of democracy.

So, with all this being said: cultural democracy alone is not enough to abolish social and economic injustice, it can be only one of several claims for democratisation. It is one means to enable democratic struggle across the multiplicity of levels of culture; one sensitive to critical and dissenting voices that enables an understanding of democracy as an open and never fully realised concept; one which includes a critique of normative inclusiveness, such as 'multiculturalism' and 'diversity' discourses.

This report has focused on the relationship between organisational form and cultural democracy, notably exploring the extent to which forms of dissent and (ant)agonism are a precondition of a democratic public. As key to this we have identified the ability to develop, articulate and hold a position that diverges and disagrees. The dangers and limitations placed on current practices and forms of these have been explored and explicated; with the positions articulated here we seek to make visible and hold visibly these limitations in existing practice and form; notably a perceived lack of opportunities to do anything configured as political or critical. The approach employed in this study has traced these processes of negotiation and what it means to take position; in this, the methodology argues that the positions are not a priori theoretical but in fact empirical and reflected. As such, this report is grounded within its own research process and the networks in which its knowledges are produced, visibly and more implicitly, and to which it also contributes in the manner of co-research. In this process, the report has been circulating already in draft forms among our own networks and served as a basis of discussion and events – and in the process has been taken forward to its now public form.

The positions taken in this study, by us, have foregrounded those cultural practitioners who have plenty of experience and practice with understanding the relationship of organisational form, communication and an interest in a democratic public. We also take these positions, not least, on the basis of our own experience and interest in these issues – developed over almost 20 years of existence of Variant as a magazine and a cultural space committed to the tenets spelled out here. In this, the report contributes to a critical engagement with the institutional and social forms of communication, the restructuring of the governance of these, as well as the organisation of work that underpins much of these processes.¹¹

In this, the position articulated serves at once as a critical interlocutor in these institutional processes – in a variety of forms, many of which seem to be uncomfortable. It is a position that is also intent on providing space and other resources for the production and circulation of knowledges that will strengthen and sustain models of artistic practice that take seriously both cultural democracy and the organisational forms conducive to these, acting as an agonistic other to hegemonic interests of creative industries and its attendant management. It does so on the insight that any attempts to fold forms of divergent public debate, and the practices and organisations that are required to participate in such debate, into a promotional crib sheet for a naturalised ecology are neither disinterested nor supportive. Confusingly, such hegemonic practices and positioning is counter-intuitive as it in fact undermines its own inherent assumptions of the creative industry's competitive capacities. Furthermore, it does away with any sense of a political sphere capable of encompassing democratic tenets of participation, by pre-structuring the gathering of actors and by shaping policy debates along favoured frames.¹²

The ways in which we communicate with one another and share cultural experiences cannot be considered a peripheral question. These are communicative channels that help produce the social world and reinforce social relations, a power that operates through communicative practices which has to be opened up to critical dispute and reconfiguration.

And with this, in the spirit of a critical debate and practice:

For divergence and antagonism.

11. Projects with which Variant considers to share affinities include e.g. BAK, basis voor actuele kunst (Utrecht), Framework: The Finnish Art Review (ceased), Metamute (London), Rab-Rab: Journal for political and formal inquiries in art (Finland).

12. See Littoz-Monnet (2012) in the discussion of agenda-setting in EU cultural policy.

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