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UNITS OF MEASURE

MARY LOU LOBSINGER

Political theorist Chantal Mouffe is certainly not alone in questioning the contradictions and abstractions within current political theory. But what stands out is her emphatic claim that the uncontested hegemony of liberalism puts the genuinely political in jeopardy, a position that pivots upon the assertion that conflict is "integral to human society, that antagonism is ineradicable."[1] Identities are formed through conflict. Antagonism is integral to the political, there can be no consensus without exclusion, no form of the political without recognition of a dominant, and no understanding of public or private without identifying an outside, a "they" constructed and dependent upon a "we." The task of democratic politics, as Mouffe would have it, is not merely to manage conflict but to turn antagonism into democratic agonism, turning enemies into adversaries engaged in the process of irresolvable, paradoxical, and conflictual consensus. There can be coalitions across a range of political sites and wars of position. Admitting that conflict is integral to the political means acknowledging that there are instances where "no rational solution could ever exist."[2]

What kind of arena or infrastructure would enable such a struggle, would foster the redirection of antagonism into the more productive adversarial? Mouffe suggests that, "Instead of trying to design institutions which, through supposedly impartial procedures, would reconcile all interests and values, the aim of all who are interested in defending and radicalizing democracy should be to contribute to the creation of vibrant, agonistic public spaces where different hegemonic political projects could be confronted."[3] Here it would seem she is asking not for a theory of institutions, but a physical space. Mouffe acknowledges that most contemporary institutions that once stood for the ideal of enlightened rational democracy appear now as mere carcasses embodying past potential, feeble symbols of one early moment in the history of democracy. Indeed, there is such *disaffection* with democratic institutions today. Mouffe is not alone in calling for new institutions, or a new public sphere; from very different perspectives, so too have figures like Paolo Virno and David Harvey. Virno has advocated for a politics of non-representative democracy to be translated into new institutions, suggesting a "non-governmental public sphere, far from the myths and rituals of sovereignty."[4] He does not imply a space or form that necessarily has physical consequences, but his concept is predicated upon the idea of public intellect, where publicness articulates a political space. Political space is described by Virno as the potential for "forms of life beyond the State."[5] On the other hand, Harvey's focus on urbanization and the production of space requires that attention be paid to concrete proposals. He demands that the values of political theory be more than inspirational, and he asks if theoretical proposals in the name of a new urban commons, for example, can be enacted in urban space.[6]

Contemporary institutions appear to represent the nostalgia for an ideal of democracy and civil society nearly two centuries old, when in fact they express in social and physical form the rapaciousness of neoliberalism's public-private collusion. Take education, specifically higher education, once considered an institutional cornerstone of liberal democracy, and now promoted as a point of entry for the citizenry of the global knowledge economy. Inarguably, the transformations of the university have been at the epicentre of the complex of contemporary socio-economic issues, and these changes have cast in high relief the paradoxical relationships between public and private, institutions and the public sphere, the city and so-called planetary urbanization.

Writing in *Dissent* in 2012, Andrew Ross aptly characterized the contemporary university as an urban economic motor.[7] A city with a research university is armed with an engine of the knowledge economy, a planning instrument for economic development and growth, and an institution promoting technical innovation within and beyond its physical boundaries. An urban research university makes and competes within new markets for education, and the performance of the institution within these markets is measured by quantitative means, statistical indicators that define the success of a globally competitive city. This urban economic motor actively engages the local real estate market through acquisition and development, especially in those new urban sectors dedicated to industry/institutional research collaborations so necessary to the global economy. The urban presence of the research university is measured in the objective form of financial capital, for example in terms of prosperity indexes.[8] Education as an institution is thus transformed into an engine of urban development, as evidenced by the constant construction and renovation of buildings; the dedication of classrooms, laboratories, and courtyards; manicured grounds; and named private sponsorships.

The university as institution and public sphere is the example par excellence of the paradoxical relation of public and private interests. The transformations in higher education coupled with the ambitions for the university as an "urban growth machine" have been a long time coming: the mid-twentieth century saw big science, the military-academic complex, and the rising prominence of data converge with pedagogical experimentation and radical calls for de-institutionalization. Long before the turn of the millennium, social policy scholars advised changes in the social organization of the university, recommending a turn to market-oriented economic competitiveness. Linking the knowledge-intensive production of research institutions to urban prosperity was deemed fundamental to national economic competitiveness in the global knowledge market. In infrastructural and socio-political terms, the relationship between institutions of higher learning and their urban environments signals, as Ross would have it, the emergence of a new type of organizational species. Outwardly it resembles the institution of old, but in actuality the legibility between public and private, between institution and corporation, is profoundly obscured. A burgeoning administrative staff schooled in dialogic consensus and the strategies of risk management now neatly manages the university. Such managed conflict resolution ultimately eliminates the possibility for the adversarial to emerge, while dialogic debate admits plethora of opinion, a kind of mirage of the communicative public sphere, but neglects the realities of extant power relations.[9]

Meanwhile, the new public spaces of the twenty-first-century university often appear luxurious. They seem open and flexible, intended to impress, encourage collaboration, and facilitate interaction and communication among users. But ultimately, what does it mean to call for new institutions and new physical public spheres within urban environments? How adequate is political theory to the challenges presented by spatialized, communicative, management-mediated politics that conflate public and private ends?

NOTES

1 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 10.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 2; Mouffe, "Agonistic Public Spaces, Democratic Politics, and the Dynamic of Passions," *Thinking Worlds: The Moscow Conference on Philosophy*, ed. J. Backstein, D. Birnbaum and S. O. Wallenstein (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), 104.

4 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 40.

5 Ibid., 66-70.

6 David Harvey, "Commonwealth: An Exchange with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri," *Artforum* 48, no. 3 (2009): 262.

7 Andrew Ross, "Universities and the Urban Growth Machine," *Dissent*, October 4, 2012, www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/universities-and-the-urban-growth-machine.

8 See martinprosperity.org/2011/10/01/creativity-and-prosperity-the-global-creativity-index.

9 Mouffe, *On the Political*, 42-51.

G20 POLICE KETTLE:
QUEEN AND SPADINA, 27 JUNE 2010
SCOTT SØRLI

Police kettles generate intense experience through the precise deployment of atmospheric techniques. Once a police kettle is put in place, a performance begins: the sun goes down and it gets dark; temperatures fall and it gets cold; relative humidity rises, moisture condenses, and it often rains. The atmosphere—our medium of existence—is regularly altered with tear gas, pepper spray, sound cannons, and electrical shocks. At a lower level, the biological organism experiences discomfort through the enforced prohibition of drinking water, consuming food, excreting waste, or changing a tampon or pad.

Special black costumes suppress the individuality of the police officers, assembling them as an anonymous mass. This collective body, while less tidy than the Tiller Girls' dance formations or North Korea's Mass Games, is equally aesthetic. The negative emotions of those kettled include anger, fear, anxiety, dread, hopelessness, and despair; because of its indiscriminate nature, kettling is a clear example of collective punishment.

Police kettling is an intermittent yet iconic function of urbanization. As the formal and material manifestation of global economic expansion, urbanization opposes the city as a political construct. Civic action, such as the political protests against neoliberal hegemony at the Toronto G20 meeting, is met with oppression that takes on a specific spatial and temporal configuration. The coherence of form and politics coincide with unusual clarity in a police kettle.

Most of those kettled at Queen and Spadina on June 27, 2010 were not protesters, but rather an assortment of shoppers, cyclists, tourists, seniors, lovers, and curious bystanders, not one of whom was subsequently convicted of any charge. In this case, the kettle, as a temporal urban infrastructure, constructed a dynamic political space: the police kettle politicized urbanites into citizenry. A crystal of civic space arose within and out of the generalized space of oppression.

The motives of the G20 police kettle are a question for many. It was either a live test or a threat. Probably both. As the implementation of economic austerity programs by political-corporate elites continues, repressive technologies that aesthetically transmit affect will not only increase in number and sensation, but will also mutate and intensify. As Benjamin writes in his famous Artwork essay, these continued efforts to "aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war."[1]

NOTES

1 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, And Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 121–122.

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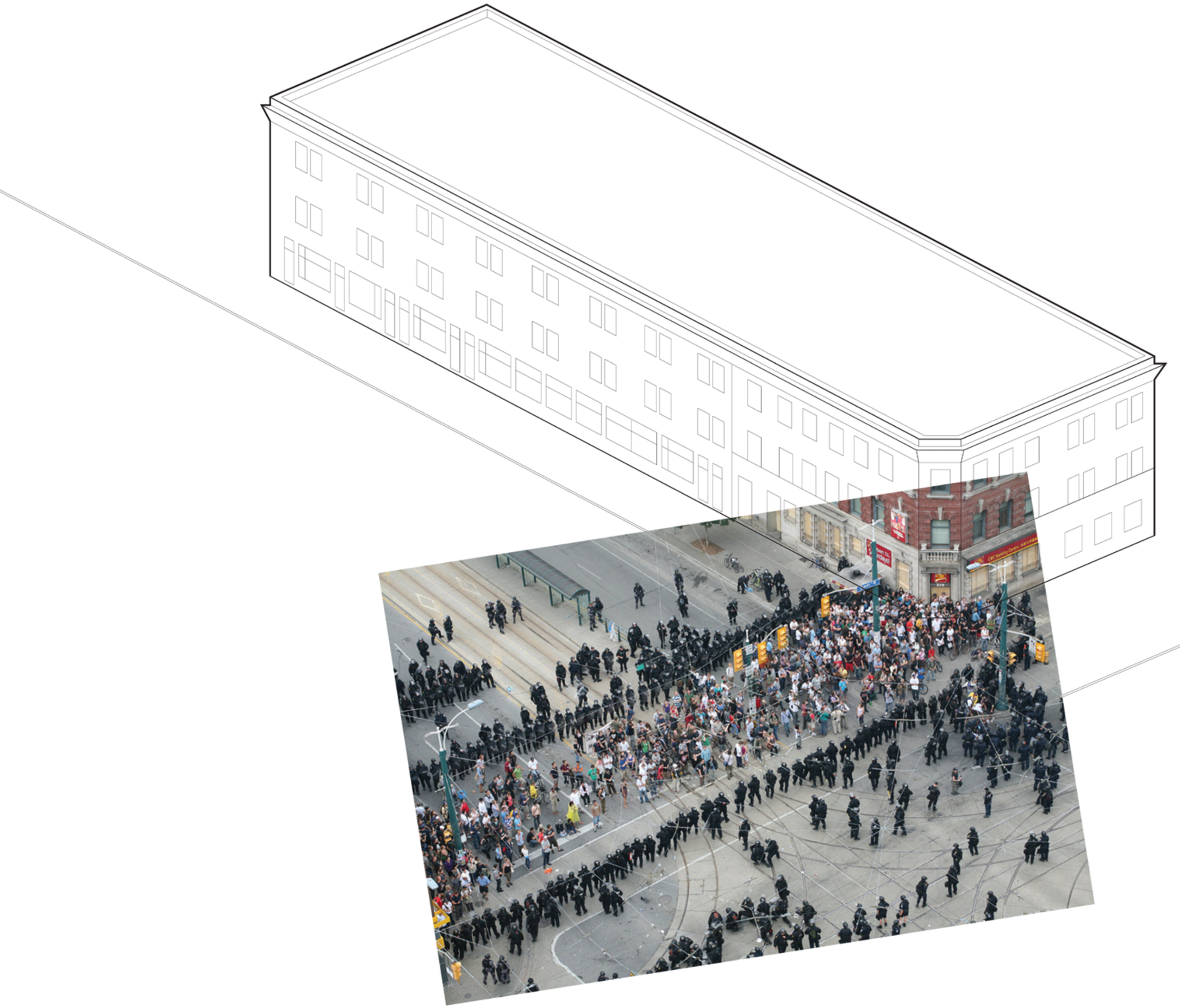
SCOTT SØRLI's trans-disciplinary practice concerns itself with moments when form and matter engage the economic and political forces that produce the city. He is co-founder of convenience, a window gallery that provides an opening for art that engages, experiments, and takes risks within the architectural, urban, and civic realms. He is also chair of Toronto's peace subcommittee of the Nathan Phillips Square Community Advisory Committee. Sørli has taught architecture at several institutions, most recently in Jakarta, Indonesia; a book and exhibition on the work of the Inundation research studio conducted there will be published in Fall 2014.

ARTIST PROJECT (reverse):
SCOTT SØRLI, *G20 Police Kettle: Queen and Spadina*, 2012. Incorporating found photo by Eldar Curovic: "An aerial view of the kettling seen from up high on the southhwest corner of Queen and Spadina, on June 27, 2010." *The Toronto Star*, 27 June 2010. Retrieved online 2012-03-18.