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The Rise of Post-democracy in Contemporary European Art (working title)

The study will examine how the contemporary art field has responded to the socio-political transformations occurring in Europe since 1989, increasingly associated in political theory with the advent of ‘post-democracy’. Whereas the processes of politico-economic transformation in Eastern Europe, initiated around 1989, were seen to mark an expansion of democracy in the continent, political theory (mainly Western) was already noting a hollowing out of democracy principally connected to the hegemony of neoliberalism. The outbreak of the 2008 financial crisis intensified both the crisis and critique of democracy in art and its institutions. Following political theory’s arguments that urge art to expand its forms of social intervention and explore the joint territory of politics and intellectual processes (Mouffe 2013), the research will examine the complex relationship between the art field and the (assumed) transition to post-democracy.

The concept of ‘post-democracy’ was developed by theorists such as Colin Crouch and Jacques Rancière, who critiqued the condition of contemporary democracy. Rancière pointed to the paradox that modern democracy exists without its essential element: the people (*demos*) whose dissent has been eliminated by systematic de-legitimation that reduced the *demos* to ‘public opinion’ - seen to (mis)represent the body of the public (Rancière 1999). Crouch identified symptoms defining the post-democratic order: the pressure of business lobbies on politicians, public debate regimented by PR experts, and growing wealth inequality, amongst others, all leading to the public’s growing frustration and withdrawal from politics (Crouch 2004).

This set of relations will be interrogated with regard to how the post-democratic order has impacted artistic production and institutionalisation in diverse sociopolitical contexts across former East and West of Europe. The analysis will develop from two angles: first, it will examine the work of artists and curators who have pursued a critique of different aspects of post-democratic systems; second, it will analyse if and how the values and ‘symptoms’ associated with post-democracy are characterised and manifested in artistic and curatorial practice and art institutional frameworks.

Finally, the thesis will explore possible synergies between art and the proposals of political theorists responding to the post-democratic order: the agonism of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, and the theories of accelerationism drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1972). This exploration will actively search for responses to the problematic state of contemporary democracy from the perspectives of political theory and art, which is particularly timely in the context of current fundamental changes in the political landscape. The study draws on art history and theory, curatorial studies, and political theory. The interdisciplinarity of the research requires a composite methodology that includes the collection of data and the examination of theoretical and primary sources. Thus, the study will involve five research methods: close reading, literature survey, interviews, discourse analysis and fieldwork. The research will result in a rigorous theoretical framework for the analysis of the relationship between post-democracy and contemporary art in both content and form. In addition to the thesis, the findings will be disseminated through channels including conference presentations and journal articles.