



Speaking Democracy: Carlos Motta's *The Good Life*

Stamatina Gregory

The good life, as examined in Aristotle's *Ethics*, engages both philosophical contemplation and the practice of "ethical virtues" involved in the participation in the life and affairs of the Athenian *polis*, or city-state. In the third book of his *Politics*, Aristotle details the possible **involvement** of citizens in these affairs: taking part in deliberative assemblies, holding rotating positions in government, and having a share in judicial office. His accounts reflect a conception of politics as an integral part of social life, instead of a separate and distinct sphere of social activity (such as economics, religion, or the aesthetic) it is relegated to today; even the verb in Greek for "to be a citizen" is synonymous with "to be active in managing the affairs of the city."¹ Although the "state" of citizenship excluded broad swaths of the population such as women, foreigners, and slaves, the structure of the average Greek *polis* required an individuals' commitment to civic participation far outstripping what is expected of the average citizen in the modern nation state.²

This classical conception of democracy is something that philosopher Hannah Arendt sought to recuperate in *The Human Condition* (1958), finding in Greek and Roman antiquity an extensive privileging of political life and political action, which she felt had been lost in modernity. Her work critiques the trajectory of traditional Western political philosophy as an autonomous enterprise that holds itself above and apart from the world of practical human action, and Arendt asserts that a philosophy and life of labor, work, and action—the *vita activa*—must form the basis of democratic participation.³

For Arendt public speech is characterized by action, and is the means by which individuals come to reveal their distinctive identities, encounter one another as members of a community, and exercise their capacity for agency.⁴ She holds up the Athenian *polis* as the model for this active space of disclosure and communicative speech.⁵ It is this conceptual space for speech and action as set forth by Arendt, as well as the formal attributes of the democratic spaces of antiquity, that Carlos Motta evokes in his project *The Good Life*.

Since 2005, Motta has traveled in Latin America, recording over 300 video interviews with civilians on the streets of twelve cities, asking questions about individuals' perceptions of U.S. foreign policy, democracy, leadership, and social inequality. These dialogues form the basis of the project, which Motta originally initiated with the intention of forming a

¹ The verb is *politheuesthai*. Richard Mulgran, "Aristotle and the Value of Political Participation," *Political Theory* (May 1990): 196.

² *Ibid.*, 206.

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958)

⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.



public archive of opinions on these subjects. Hailing from Bogotá, Colombia, Motta was interested in how U.S. interventionism was perceived across the continent, as well as in understanding the role of these events on his own perceptions of what it means to be a citizen, an acting subject in society. Basing his itinerary on cities that had been influenced by specific historical circumstances (sites of failed revolutions, military coups, and economic reforms), Motta, together with local assistants, sought out a range of individuals to speak with in each city. His dialogues with students, teachers, activists, laborers, etc. resulted in a spectrum of opinion which fluctuated according to local situations and forms of government. In Santiago, many responses touched on the overthrow of former Chilean president Salvador Allende in a military coup; in Buenos Aires, the recent economic impositions of the International Monetary Fund were a source of discussion. The dialogues explore the political and social landscapes of each city and the interview subjects' lives, unearthing personal narratives and revealing a breadth of collective memory. Each dialogue takes place outdoors, in parks, plazas or sidewalks, transforming public space into a space of action through public disclosure.

In a gallery-based installation at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia in early 2008, viewers encountered these interviews as a nine-channel video installation. Monitors were mounted on a four-part, two-tiered wooden structure that was an abstracted reference to the Priene, the theater and general space of the Athenian *agora*, in which citizens not only bought and sold goods, but met, debated, and participated in legislative and judicial decisions. The position of the monitors on the structure allowed them to metaphorically function as speaking subjects—citizens—in the space, addressing their comments to a wider forum. In a further evocation of Arendt's space of public disclosure (and her theorization of the *vita activa*, or "active life," which became increasingly important to Motta over the course of the project) the structure also created a space for viewers to sit, physically placing them among the previously recorded speaking subjects.

The walls surrounding the structure featured an installation of over 500 video stills, printed as 5 by 7 inch snapshots. Images were grouped together geographically and chronologically; as in the videos, they were unlabeled (although an image of that country's flag preceded each grouping). Thematically arranged, the stills examined select aspects of life and visual culture in each city; the path of a religious penitent, public stations of the cross for Catholic parades, graffitied political statements, and monuments to failed revolutions. As photographs, these images functioned as indexical traces of physical events created by interventionist policies and their aftermath, and symbolically surrounding the "speaking space" of the structure. Placed throughout the space was a newsprint publication, in which artists Ashley Hunt, Naeem Mohaiemen, and Oliver Ressler, and political theorist Maria Mercedes Gomez presented short essays in response to the question "What is democracy to you?" from different perspectives and using different approaches. Both the use of the video medium and the inclusion of this "newspaper" referred to mass media, which now is now closely associated with the idea of public speech in Western society.



The Good Life takes a seemingly straightforward documentary approach to the interview process, though it makes overt references to the democratic spaces of antiquity. Neither strategy, however, is presented as unproblematic. The formal structure of the videos underscores the centrality of the speaking subject. Unlike some documentary work which focuses on the performative interaction between the interviewer or filmmaker and their subjects (along the lines of Michael Moore), Motta keeps the camera on the people he is speaking with, and his presence limited to his questions being read and heard. This is not an effort to efface the role of the interviewer or artist; rather, it functions as an acknowledgment of the critical importance of speech as action, and as a way for the dialogues to symbolically function as open and public.

Much like Arendt's recuperation of the Greek paradigm, the project acknowledges a singularly powerful, if clearly imperfect, precedent for the theorizing of a new political model, a model that must first undertake a critical reevaluation of the meaning of the word "citizen." The model from antiquity is critiqued on a number of levels, and an aspect of the contemporary problem of citizenship is directly addressed in the newsprint publication by Ashley Hunt. In his essay "Tricks of Logic and Constellations of Time," he examines the relationship of the prison system to systemic disenfranchisement and racial control. As an institution which has enabled lawmakers to not only strip individuals of their rights as citizens, but to also disable specific voting blocs and disrupt collective political identification, he identifies the prison as an instrument of the state, one which lies squarely in opposition to democracy.

Motta's complication of the model provided by antiquity is also made clear through the exhibition's formal attributes. The supportive structure was built in the round, around a distinct center point, fitting together into an abstracted, compacted replica of the Priene. However, in this installation, the structure is split into four parts, splayed across the exhibition space in a way that underscores its fragmentation, but which still allows for proximity and intimacy among the pieces. This arrangement seems to acknowledge the fundamental split between the classical model of democracy that the project formally evokes, and of the democratic models and political realities of our modern world, which the subjects in the videos describe. Moreover, it makes a statement about the contested nature of the term "democracy" itself; a complex multiplicity of ideas over which people in political theory, social movements, and cultural practices hold their own sets of debates.

Among the plethora of opinions on the concepts of democracy presented in *The Good Life*, one in particular recurs: the view that democracy necessarily means more than a single, occasional vote on a predetermined issue, or a vote for one of a set of pre-selected political candidates. A Caracas historian Motta interviews points out that the recent efforts in Venezuela to integrate ordinary citizens in decision making processes through community councils qualify that country as a democracy. An 80 year-old Buenos Aires woman declares that, despite her age, she has yet to have "lived in an ample democracy," while a lawyer in Guatemala City disavows the term completely for any country limited



to electoral processes. In listening to their statements, it becomes apparent to the viewer that Arendt's well-known arguments against representative democracy have a popular echo. For Arendt, the relinquishing of day-to-day deliberation and action to a small number of holders of power destroys the "space of appearance" in which citizenship can be fully realized.⁶ The recuperation of this space clearly occupies a wider political imaginary for Motta and his subjects.

Political philosopher Chantal Mouffe has written extensively about the impossibility of a wholly emancipated model of representative democracy, as well as the inevitable failure of the linked idea of rational consensus in decision-making. She describes how both these concepts are inherently flawed as they stem from the universalizing concept of liberal individualism, a hegemonic viewpoint that has only increased with the tide of globalization and that effectively dismantles possibilities for collective action.⁷ The idea of rational consensus—the assumption of collective agreement about a set of predetermined issues—ultimately fails to acknowledge the constantly shifting dimensions of power, social divisions and pluralities of interests and demands. Mouffe notes the way the rhetoric of consensus effaces discussion of these pluralities, particularly in the recent attempt to shift political discourse toward moral polarities instead of partisan ones (witness the increasingly popular calls for "bipartisan" coalitions to address economic issues in the US government, paired with now-ubiquitous rhetoric on "evil" and "the enemy").

Mouffe argues that citizens need the possibility of identifying with a range of democratic political identities. This diversity of identities must extend beyond a traditional liberal interpretation of pluralism, which assumes that an infinite number of voices and values that can exist harmoniously under the spirit of individualism.⁸ She proposes that instead of rational consensus we need a consensus of conflict. To this end, she postulates a model that she calls "agonistic pluralism," which incorporates an awareness of the exclusions and power struggles inherent in society, and integrates these shifting dynamics, and the identities they form, into decision-making processes.⁹

Motta's multivalent project suggests such a democratic model. It presents both a multiplicity of voices, but also demonstrates how those voices coalesce into collective identifications; of nationhood, of class, of vocation, and of social and familial roles (such as the Argentinean activist group Mothers of Mayo he interviews?). By taking as its point of departure the examination of the political and social landscape created by policies of intervention, the project underscores the inevitable shaping of those identities, and of all political identities, by conflict.

⁶ Eric Wainwright, "The Vita Activa of Hannah Arendt," *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* (December 1989): 27.

⁷ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁹ Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" *Social Research* (Fall 1999)



The project also touches on the profoundly affective nature of the political. Whether manifested in a life of labor activism, religious devotion, hip nihilism, or radical adherence to nationalist myth, political identification (or dis-identification) is ultimately a process of emotion, which any democratic model must take into account.¹⁰ The role of affect is not lost on ordinary citizens: as an interviewee in Tegucigalpa clearly states, “For democracy, there must be love.” The multitude of narratives in *The Good Life*, many of them poignant (such as a tale of mass extermination of stray dogs in Santiago), draw us in with their emotional power, thereby make that power clear. The elaboration of these narratives makes the case for a democracy of multiple positions, and incorporates us into an ongoing, participatory effort to both speak and to understand.

Stamatina Gregory is a Whitney Lauder Fellow at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia and an independent curator.

¹⁰ In taking into account the affective dimension of politics, Mouffe argues for a serious engagement with psychoanalysis, specifically Freud and accounts of the process of identification. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 25.