

I08: NEW/OLD MODES OF PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

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Every order is therefore political and based on some form of exclusion. There are always other possibilities that have been repressed and that can be reactivated. Chantal Mouffe¹

THE THEORETICAL BASIS: SUBTLE COUNTER-HEGEMONY

Chantal Mouffe² questions whether artistic practices can and do play a critical role in society when artists themselves have become a necessary part of capitalist production and consumption. She suggests that what is needed are interventions in different social spaces in order to oppose, challenge and undermine the "imaginary environment necessary for its reproduction."³

The Gramscian concept of counter-hegemony is the theoretical ground of these interventions. Hegemony – normative views about political and social reality – is and can be challenged by counter-hegemonic interventions.⁴ Importantly, counter-hegemonic moves are *affective*, because praxis and understanding are rooted in "feeling" and aim to arouse "passion." Gramsci writes that any revolution "presupposes the formation of a new set of standards, a new psychology, new ways of feeling, thinking and living."⁵

According to Gramsci, it is not enough to change the mode of production; the supporting ideology must also be challenged, changed and ultimately overthrown. Counter-hegemonic resistance hence involves struggling over and changing dominant attitudes, beliefs and emotions about the world.⁶

It is within this theoretical context that I wish to situate the I08 project, in particular in the form of the *I08 cups* project. Through a series of 'performances,' the I08 project is attempting to challenge the prevailing industrial system at the ideological (and hence emotional) level.

Overall, *I08* emphasises imperfection, a variety of production technologies, the use of safe, toxic-free materials and different interactions with 'participants,' depending on the object. I am making a subtle counter-hegemonic intervention, aiming to "disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to spread, bringing to the fore its repressive character."⁷ I propose substituting alternative realities: hand-made everyday objects – imperfect, each one different, yet similar.

As Chantal Mouffe has pointed out, "today artists cannot pretend any more to constitute an avant-garde offering a radical critique, but this is not a reason to proclaim that their political role has ended. They still can play an important role in the hegemonic struggle by subverting the dominant hegemony and by contributing to the construction of new subjectivities."⁸ My objects do not appear avant-garde, yet offer a radical critique of production/consumption in twenty-first-century neoliberal capitalism.



Figure 1. Range of glazes in 108 cups. Photograph: Pam McKinlay

108 CUPS: AN ESCAPE FROM THE DAILY CAPITALIST GRIND (PUN INTENDED)

In 2016, Otago Polytechnic's Eden Café banned the service of coffee in disposable takeaway cups to stop 1000 paper cups heading to landfill each week. This inspired a reconsideration of the vessels used to serve coffee and how they could be more 'sustainable'. (I will not address here the thoroughly problematic concept of sustainability, but see Rose and Cachelin 2018⁹). In an initial response, Otago Polytechnic ceramics students created the first 40 ceramic cups for the cafe.

In 2017, I decided to continue this effort by creating a further 108 hand-thrown cups for Eden Cafe. However, rather than providing a 'random' selection of cups made by a variety of makers, I decided that these cups should provide a consistent and counter-hegemonic message. Arousing 'feeling,' pointing towards a new way of thinking must be accompanied by some tangible, experiential signposts. These signposts included the way the cups were made, their materiality, their colour and their number. The number 108 is imbued with significance in a number of spiritual traditions – from Vedic India to old Germanic sagas, from ancient Peru to ancient Rome – as well as having astronomical significance. Curiously, the distance of the Earth from the sun is around 108 times the diameter of the sun.

The cups were not only made from Dunedin-sourced clay bodies or clay bodies prepared by ceramicists at the Otago Polytechnic ceramics studio, but I also chose six different coloured glazes to represent the six senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and extrasensory perception. To emphasise different throwing technologies, I threw half the cups on a kick wheel (representing the past as well as the future) and the other half on an electric wheel (representing present production methods).

To symbolise and ensure a human future, I only use safe, non-toxic materials. All glazes are free from toxic metal oxides such as cadmium, manganese, cobalt, barium and lithium. All cups are stoneware and are gas-reduction fired to 1280° C.

My aim was to go well beyond mere sustainability. I felt inspired to introduce others to a more human experience, one that is unique and handcrafted: each cup feeling different from the next; challenging expectations on the vessels that are used in a café; finding joy in a humble, but unique cup; and creating a special experience that is also available to everyone.

To paraphrase Melser;¹⁰ I aim for a counter-ideology that values the imprint of the hand or process of the maker. My cups emphasise appreciation by touch and by being sensuous. Their 'virtue' lies in their rejection of industrial perfection, instead resolutely aiming for the imperfect. Instead of imitating industrial and computerised values, these cups aim to provide relief from the mass-produced.

An encounter with one of the *108 cups* provides a daily escape from the capitalist machine. It is a small but perhaps significant jolt away from mass production and consumption.

My aim is to create a porthole into a different reality. By travelling through the porthole, I am instilling a desire for the hand-crafted, against the mass-produced. Encountering one of the *108 cups* becomes a signal, a signpost. We can escape the mass-produced, using handcrafted, locally made cups instead. Imperfections and differences become signposts of the possibility of a different reality. Handcrafted but not expensive, not reserved for 'posh' people, not found in a designer shop.

But today, craft objects in all their guises have very much become the domain of the middle and elite classes: handcrafted shoes, handcrafted bicycles, hand-knitted scarfs, handcrafted beer – the list goes on. Like other consumer objects, handcrafted objects become a signifier of the educated/elite/wealthy class one belongs or aspires to. These objects are fetishised in the sense that the 'owner' projects onto them his or her desires for a different kind of world, a world in which they probably would not exist. A world in which the 'owner' does not need to feel guilty about the way the object was crafted.



Figure 2. Detail- *108 cups*. Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

The current expectation is that a cup used at a café has no value, no story, and is mass produced, with little care. Yet each cup also captures the moment of making, the energy of the maker or the industrial machine, depending on its creation. My cups are designed to create the opposite of the expectation normally attached to café experiences: they are not paper cups to be thrown away and they are not mass produced. These objects invite a pause, a different experience, a rupture of the daily grind.

Each cup embodies duration in the Bergsonian sense. "Duration is the 'field' in which difference lives and plays itself out. Duration is that which undoes as well as what makes: to the extent that duration entails an open future, it involves the fracturing and opening up of the past and the present to what is virtual in them, to what in them differs from the actual, to what in them can bring forth the new."¹¹ The handmade cup – encountered unexpectedly, and then hoped for in a daily ritualistic encounter:

A handmade cup can provide a new sense of duration through its making and maker. Sustainability, now largely an empty and tired slogan, can be renewed: it becomes about getting back to reusing and repairing, about caring for the objects that participate in our lives.

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- 1 Chantal Mouffe, *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Space*, 2007, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html> (accessed 8 Feb 2018).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 A Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (New York: International, 1987).
- 5 A Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 41.
- 6 J-P Reed, "Theorist of Subaltern Subjectivity: Antonio Gramsci, Popular Beliefs, Political Passion, and Reciprocal Learning," *Critical Sociology*, 39:4 (2012), 1-31.
- 7 Mouffe, *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Space*.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Rose, J and A Cachelin, "Critical Sustainability: incorporating critical theories into contested sustainabilities," *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*. (2018) DOI:10.1007/s13412-018-0502-9.
- 10 P Melser, *The Unknown Craftsman*, 2016, <https://paulmelser.co.nz/unknown-craftsman> (accessed 2 April 2018).
- 11 Elizabeth Grosz, "Bergson, Deleuze and the Becoming of Unbecoming," *Parallax*, 11:2 (2005), 4-13.