

Indifference. Art, Liberalism and the Politics of Place

Nick Ferguson, PhD Thesis. 2015

Abstract

This thesis explores competing conceptualisations of indifference, and how they might be used to theorise location-driven art. Through a series of cross readings between aesthetic theory, political philosophy and political geography, it shows how indifference has been imagined as a disruptor of power, both public and private.

In classical liberal thought, indifference was a way of limiting governance, primarily through a notion of *laissez-faire*. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there developed philosophical framings of indifference as an ethical mode of attention. In these imaginaries, not entirely compatible with the first, indifference is a gaze that subverts conventional acts of looking that are linked, via desire, to an economy of selfhood. In other accounts, predominantly literary, indifference is a citizen-subject position adopted in response to the experience of political powerlessness. It is the last-resort of the disenfranchised, a gesture of disaffection through which the citizen-subject might resist instrumentality. Many of these discourses have jostled with others that are united in the disavowal of indifference. Significant among these are post-Marxist political geographies, for whom indifference is linked to differentiated wealth creation through the back and forth transformation of place and space.

In the mid twentieth century, rival conceptualisations of indifference came together in the figure of the artist. Some have been integral to rationales of the artist's mercantilism. Others have given credence to the notion of artistic critique, others to the artist as aesthete, others, via a notion of 'aesthetic indifference', to conceptualism. Others still have informed radical approaches to art's site. Collectively, they may be used as an optic onto location-driven art.

Location-driven art has, since the 1990s, played a central role in state sanctioned urban and rural regeneration initiatives. Insofar as these initiatives distribute wealth upwards, they appear to be, despite their rhetoric, largely indifferent to the needs of the societies on behalf of whom they purport to act. Where art commissioning is involved, this observation makes for a complex picture of the artist's subjectivity, not least because conflictual practices of indifference are uniquely conjoined within it: a once-critical indifference and a *laissez-faire* indifference more commonly associated with free market economics.

Drawing on this analysis, and with recourse to examples from location-driven art since the 1960s, it is argued that artworks produced to cultivate a sense of place in the name of social welfare may not in practice serve such ends. Rather, they threaten to reinforce hierarchies already operative in the concept of place. If they do so, their instigators are arguably complicit in the very inequalities that they seek to eliminate.