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Urban media activism

Architectonic actions

It is the winter of 2001/2002 and we are in the Alexanderplatz Underground station in Berlin. On a space normally covered by a large advertisement, cryptic communications are to be seen lighting up at irregular intervals. Examples:

“2001-12-15 15:42:06

“By the time you read this message everything will have changed. The true life.”

“2001-11-17

“Swords to cigarettes: Smoke for peace!”

“2001-11-17

“Norbert P. Please report home at once. Heidi and Moni” (1)

These communications are short messages that were sent by mobile phone and text messaging services to a Berlin group called “rude_architecture”, which consists of the architects, Friedrich von Borries, Gesa Glück and Tobias Neumann.

Each message (there were about 10,000 in all) was on display in the Underground station exactly 24 hours later. The project was called *urban diary*, for Berliners were supposed to use their mobile phones as typewriters on which to keep a public diary for a period of 100 days. This turned the Underground station, which is normally perceived by several thousand people daily as nothing more than a transit area, into a different kind of place by providing it with an interesting new characteristic.

The only limitation on the texts that people could write on the wall was the maximum of 160 characters that can be transmitted in a text message. The texts organized themselves. And that was precisely the intention of the initiators: to create a framework in which non-controlled communication could take place in public. (2) Because the installation gave rise to amazement, people got talking to one another who without this stimulus would never have exchanged a word. Quite a few individuals used the 24-hour delay to send a message to a loved one on the next day at the very time when the addressee could be expected to be in the station. The project was a public game with a private medium – the mobile phone – which at the same time was intended to restore the public character of a place which in legal terms had always been public without ever really being felt to be such by most of those who used it.

Urban diary is a media art project (3), although its authors still see themselves more as architects than as artists even if, as they say, it is based on an “extended concept of architecture involving artistic interventions and the generation of communicative processes” (4) On its website “rude_architecture” declares its aim to be “the transformation of the use of urban spaces”. This is to be achieved by means of “interventions that activate public places and address the transformation of the city by technical communications media”. There is no mention of art.

“rude_architecture” is not alone with its project and programmatic statements of this kind. A whole series of offices or groups have now sprung up in which architects or town planners have entered into more or less loose associations with graphic artists and other designers in order to carry out projects which lie outside the scope of conventional architecture and town planning. Often the very names emphasize their unusual nature: AA_Architects Anonymous, osa_Office for subversive Architecture, Team 444, Raumlabor (≈ “Space Lab”), SNAG (Super New Action Group), Peanutz architekten, Studio Urban Catalyst, etc. (5) They take part in art competitions, open their offices for use as exhibition halls, occupy various places with temporary actions or installations, publish periodicals and in general do a lot of things that are very reminiscent of action, performance or media art. Still, they continue to insist that their cultural origins are in architecture and town planning and they refuse to abandon their claim that these actions have something to do with architecture. Why is this?

There is nothing particularly new about architects dabbling in art or on its fringes in order to do things for which the prevailing architectural discourse and professional practice leave little or no room. Under the protection of the artistic, even if it is no more than an attitude, one can extend the field of the architectonic for oneself and others while at the same time criticizing other people’s positions. This is possible because one is acting on one’s own behalf, setting agendas, attracting attention and showing in a more open and perhaps clearer manner what one considers to be a creative approach appropriate to the times.

What is striking about the choice of names is a certain polemical vehemence directed against the structuring and aestheticization of space by such static objects as houses. There is a reluctance to be confined to the classical role of the professional architect and an emphasis on the structuring of space as a process. The spaces offered by the city are seen in “open” terms (6) as a structured product of social, political and economic processes. Open spaces, whether public or private, are thus fields of action that are given life as a result of actions, fields in which countless spatial patterns – material and immaterial – overlap.

It is less a matter of structures than of employing novel means, such as temporary interventions and communicative processes, to make urban spaces more public and open to new options. The aim is to achieve a more optimistic, more experimental style of urban living, starting by redefining and transforming barren and empty sites in the city, first of all for oneself.

A good example of this is the periodical *An Architektur – Produktion und Gebrauch gebauter Umwelt* (An Architecture – Production and Use of a Built Environment), (7) which has been published in Berlin since 2002. It advocates a “socially critical concept of architecture” and declares both discourse on the subject of space and the use of existing structures to be essential elements of architectural practice.

A lot of it has to do with criticism: criticism of the prevailing practice of town planning and architecture as well as criticism of the cities as they are now. Questions are raised about the political, economic and social patterns, images and ideologies which give rise to urban spaces and shape them. The criticism focuses on the concept of “neo-liberal urban reconstruction” (8) and the associated “process of social polarization, cultural capitalisation, ethnic exclusion, general monitoring and privatization of public places”. (9) An important inspiration for *An Architektur* is seen in the spatial theories developed in the 1970s by the French philosopher, Henri Lefèbvre, to whom the pilot edition of *An Architektur* was dedicated. The periodical originated at Berlin’s Hochschule der Künste (College of Arts) in an “architecture collective” founded in 1995 that called itself “Freies Fach” (Empty Compartment / Free Specialization) and saw its role in “urban politics”. The members of the “Freies Fach”, mainly young or budding architects, but also artists and publicists, held parties with the character of demonstrations, once even hijacking a tourist bus and offering the passengers an “alternative city tour”. Another time they set up a discussion platform in a bar to address the issue of surveillance technology as an example of security run wild. Lectures were held and texts published on the results of urban actions and situational experiments – known as “tests” – held in public areas. The point of these “tests” was to find out how public spaces defined as “public” really are, to what extent administrative, commercial and political regulations restricted their public character, or how public places were subjectively experienced by those who used them. The periodical *An Architektur* now provides a stronger theoretical foundation for such experimental activities.

Many of the temporary actions and experiments being carried out today, which can only be interpreted as architecture in an extended sense, recall the traditions of performance-type practices as developed by the post-war *avant-gardes* in action art, the Fluxus movement, and above all the Situationists.

Situationist “building” had to remain a critical examination and dismantling of what existed. As a strategy of making an exact reconnaissance of the city and as a permanent challenge to occupy spaces (in a perfectly practical way) by staging performances in them that were imbued with passion and imagination, Situationism has retained its relevance as a critique of town planning.

Architectonic/artistic and intellectual practices, of which the current architectural activism and historical Situationism are examples, are often described by the term “performative”, which is taken from speech act theory. Such “performative practices” are less concerned with the design of buildings than with devising a meta-level with a view to reformulating the basis of architecture.

We may define architecture as an intuitive and reflexive science concerned with spatial perceptions in the complex conditions of its time before proceeding to the methodological stage. It is an applied theory which uses concrete actions to discover what three-dimensional space is or can be, thereby revealing what determines it or could determine it differently. At the same time it is a spatial practice, which, if it succeeds in changing existing values and stereotypes, opens up new fields of action and can produce new “architectonic figures”, which are what we need to have if we are to experience architecture as an intellectual model. Such models are always dynamic in a way similar to what László Moholy-Nagy wrote about dance as “an elementary means of fulfilling the desire to shape space. It can compress space, organize it: space expands, sinks and floats – fluctuating in all directions.” (12) In performative models for possible new spatial relationships architecture is outlined as a programme of “living images”.

But engaging in performative activities does not automatically mean criticizing the prevailing order. The performative approach has long since been extended, not least through the aesthetic applications of technology, to embrace multimedia and intermedia performances and today represents an event and spectacle-dominated culture of unprecedented dimensions. Electronic media have added a lot of colour and sound to the world we live in. They have filled it with activities by means of which a permanent presence can be given to what is absent. We hardly notice any more that we are constantly surrounded by technically transmitted sounds and images. Music in lifts, supermarkets and restaurants is taken for granted. If we think of the electronic billboards and screens, radio, television, cinema, glossy magazines and newspapers, the ability to reach anyone at any time by mobile phone, etc., we realize that the world portrayed by technical media has become larger and denser. Urban spaces are increasingly acquiring elements of mobility, the transitions between enclosed

spaces and images are in flux. Monitors, screens and video displays open up corridors of time, monitoring systems record the movements of passers-by, urban images are reproduced in the media, and millions of mobile phones link up public places with private affairs.

Those who wish to read, interpret and reinvent the media-dominated city in a way that differs from that imposed by the prevailing forces of materialism, technological rationality and consumerism find that the limitations on their scope for action have greatly receded.

The maximum flexibility and mobility of urban economies – and of individuals – (speculatively propagated by the Situationists in the 1960s) have now become neo-liberal demands. This reduces the performative to a consumption factor. Performative displays aimed at developing new emancipatory architectonic figures face gigantic commercial competition. The danger that existing patterns and attitudes will only be confirmed and perceived as mere entertainment is greater than ever.

At the same time countless new forms of participation as well as of free, independent and direct communication are made possible by electronic networks. The art of moving through urban space must be re-examined as both a physical and a media activity. The more natural it becomes to perceive reality not directly, but as a technically projected image, the less hope there is – in contrast to the situation in the 1960s – for a reanimation of immediacy.

Boundaries, space allocations and representations are part of a constant media performance. They present a radical challenge to the “domesticity” of architecture. The individual is constantly faced with the task of interpreting the spatial layers of movement, without being able to determine clearly where one begins or another ends. The search for new architectonic figures has to proceed in the constant awareness of the shifting nature of spatial relationships, which are “vireal”, i.e. both physical (“real”) and media-determined (“virtual”).

If architecture fails to re-examine itself in this context, it restricts its own field of action and reduces itself to the design of individual projects, to the smooth administration of space, and to being a commercial service.

The argument is that the use of information and communication technologies, especially in a localized and fragmented way, permits the development of new positions aimed at creating an urban culture composed of many voices and dense layers that are not always controllable and sometimes even conflicting. Above all the networked technologies have the power to

break through social, economic and spatial barriers. By allowing special, if unplanned encounters and alliances, they give rise to new architectonic figures.

As regards computers and their networks, it is no longer a question of inventing radically new devices, instruments or machines. This may have been how the *avant-gardes* of the 1920s, the Fluxus artists of the post-war period, the pioneers of action art and videos or the early network artists saw their task. Nowadays, if we want to generate something that differs significantly from the routine productions of the commercial media, we tend to look for unusual combinations of existing materials and means of expression.

Artists and media activists in particular have long been working to oppose the increasing subjection of technical media worlds to the principles of ergonomics and globalization. The method employed is the generation of dramaturgies of difference. This is done by developing, for example, projects that stress the local, the closeness of those of like mind or express sensibilities which perceive man as not just the subject of economic and social constraints but as a sensual, physical being that cannot be digitized (i.e. rendered “analog”) or commercialized.

The “new media” offer many new possibilities of promoting processes and networks in the public sphere. They help to build up local media in the tradition of neighbourhood newspapers or local radio. Digital information technologies and media systems in general can often, despite or because of their largely immaterial character, produce strong spatial effects. *Son et lumière* installations invest facades and locations with a media aura. (13) Empty premises or plots of land can be conceptually upgraded by temporarily putting them to some other use than the one originally intended. The Chaos Computer Club used a light installation to play on the facade of the “Haus des Lehrers” [a communal facility for teachers in the former East Germany, tr.] on Berlin’s Alexanderplatz square. By means of a simple software package put together on the Internet it was possible to generate animations for the facade or play table tennis on it with a mobile phone. (14) Wherever an “official” culture is absent, new appropriation rituals are invented. The Berlin “Table Tennis Guerrilla” maintains that in principle all surfaces appropriated for light displays help to make people feel good. They see themselves as an open association which seeks a new public place every week to play table tennis. One can find out where they are playing at any given time by e-mail. (15) In many cities there are initiatives that use WLAN technology (16) to facilitate, for a small fee (or free of charge), wireless access to the Internet in public places. (17) In most media art projects in urban locations the focus is on the community-forming, consensual and communicative aspect. Internet platforms can become participatory forums for different

perceptions and interpretations of a city, so that places which people no longer register consciously are rediscovered in a new guise. With a view to possible scenarios such places can be discussed in a different light. The Internet portal “anderes dresden” (= a different Dresden) is such a project. (18)

The practice of intervening in the daily experience of others so as to draw their attention to something different is similar, especially if information technology is involved, to hacking, which is sometimes defined (mostly by hackers themselves) in rather euphemistic and general terms as a method of using technology creatively. According to a corporate consultant, the strategies of hackers consist in “penetrating an alien, unknown system, finding one’s way about it, exploring its security mechanisms and, finally, using appropriate means to introduce disorientations or reorientations... Their way of working is experimental and subversive, characterized in equal measure by playful seriousness and serious play – a mixture of artistic and scientific approaches ... an important ingredient of success when acting under conditions of extreme unpredictability.” (19)

The creative attempt to find new, temporary uses for urban locations is sometimes described by media activists as a kind of hacking – urban hacking. This is usually in connection with campaigns against certain tendencies which are felt to be negative, such as the video monitoring of public places. One of the most unusual actions was that of the “Surveillance Camera Players”. For the benefit of those behind the monitoring cameras they publicly performed short plays in the former’s field of vision with the aid of cardboard props. (20)

Such media activist methods are of interest to conceptual architects and urban designers who shift their attention from strategies for ordering and organizing space to actions, activities and interactions. The reason for this is that they can precipitate certain kinds of intervention that lend dynamism to urban structures. It is one thing to point to the potential of empty and anonymous places in an abstract and academic fashion, quite another to have to deal with them in practical and concrete terms. One might speak of a new Situationism. Unlike its historical predecessors, however, this variant lacks a grand political and social programme and is less inclined to the intellectual construction of alternative worlds. It is more realistic and pragmatic. The freedom of art is used to practise architecture in a more generalized sense. But the protagonists of the new “extended architecture” steer clear of universal visions. They intervene without claiming to possess the *one* true solution to a certain problem. They generally demand and promote the consideration of several options, more communication, more transparency and more participation. These architects want to be seen more as initiators and designers of processes, they do not want architecture to be

reduced to the aestheticization of space. With such an expanded notion of architecture they practise it as an interdisciplinary approach to urban and cultural space. They say, for example: “Our interests revolve around architecture, but we see it as a very broad discipline, as a method of cultural research. We want to rethink spatial conventions and make subtle changes to them. Sometimes this leads to performances or installations. Or to digital art and books. Of course we also design buildings.” (21)

Architecture?

The public and private spheres have grown fuzzy at the edges. The ideas of the “middle class home” and of “middle-classness” itself are in a state of crisis. Modern man lives with uncertainty. Even the *avant-garde* architects of the 1920s were reacting to this.

Modern architecture has reorganized the relationship between indoors and outdoors. With its glassy transparency it has brought the outdoors indoors in the form of a picture. And in exactly the same way the indoors presents a picture to the outdoors. In the tradition of Situationist concepts the representatives of the nomadic architecture of the 1960s and 1970s (Archigram, Superzoom, etc.) have radically – in the literal sense of the word – set the subject in motion by demanding that the home be “placeless”. Information and communication technologies have had the effect of perpetuating this instability, this problemizing of the relationship between subject and space, while at the same time providing means of dealing with it.

** The information in brackets after the German titles below does not indicate an official translation of the work concerned; it is designed for comprehension purposes only.

1) www.urban-diary.de

2) Of course exceptions were made in the case of extremist slogans; but according to “rude_architecture” there were hardly any of these.

3) The project was part of the “Berlin Alexanderplatz U2” series of exhibitions organized by the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (“New Graphic Art Society” – NGBK), 14. 11. 2001–22. 1. 2002

4) www.rude_architecture.de

5) Cf. archplus, Zeitschrift für Architektur und Städtebau 36 (2003); No. 166 Off-Architektur 1: Szenen (Scenes), 36 (2003); No. 167 Off-Architektur 2: Netzwerke (Networks)

6) Cf.: Fecht, Tom/Kamper, Dietmar (eds.): Umzug ins Offene. Vier Versuche über den Raum (Move into the Open. Four Essays on Space), Vienna/New York 1998

7) www.anarchitectur.com

- 8) Ibid.
- 9) Ibid.
- 10) Debord, Guy: Rapport über die Konstruktion von Situationen (Report on the Construction of Situations), 1957; quoted in: Levin, Thomas Y.: Geopolitik des Winterschlafs. Zum Urbanismus der Situationisten (Geopolitics of Hibernation. On the Town Planning of the Situationists), in: derive, the Magazine of the Interdisciplinary Courses at the Muthesius-Hochschule für Kunst und Gestaltung (Academy of Art and Design) Kiel, Kiel 2001, pp. 46–69
- 11) Ibid.
- 12) Ibid., p.195
- 13) The reader will be familiar with the works of Jenny Holzer, which limit themselves almost exclusively to the written and spoken word. They appear on LED display boards or as projections in squares and on buildings.
- 14) www.blinkenlights.de
- 15) tischtennisparty@berlin.de
- 16) WLAN = Wireless Local Area Network. A technology originally developed to create the cable-free office.
- 17) One such initiative in New York has the following website: <http://www.nycwireless.net/>
- 18) www.anderes-dresden.de
- 19) Franz Liebl in: Gillies, Judith-Maria: Zum Wesen der Strategie (On the Essence of Strategy); in: Mck Wissen 2 (2003) H.7, pp. 24–32
- 20) www.notbored.org/the-scp.html
- 21) Diller, Liz (Diller + Scofidio Architects): Pixel sind für uns wie Backsteine (To us pixels are like bricks) [interview with Gerhard Mack]; in: Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 5 May 2002
- 22) For this reason Friedrich von Borries, Gesa Glück and Tobias Neumann were invited together with other specialists in order to experiment with us in public situations that are both physical and virtual at the same time.
- 23) Discursive mapping may thus be regarded as a form of planning strategy.
- 24) An exception must of course be made in the case of Gropius' private construction office.
- 25) Winkler, Klaus-Jürgen: Bauen und Entwerfen am Bauhaus 1919–1933 (Building and Design at the Bauhaus, 1919-33), Weimar 2003, p.10
- 26) Moholy-Nagy, László: Von Material zu Architektur (From Material to Architecture) [facsimile of the first, 1929 edition], Mainz/Berlin 1968, p. 203