

Curated Cities

On the contradictions and conflicting realities of city-marketing and image production in european cities.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak here at this conference in a city which I knew mainly by passing through; being a temporary guest, - and thereby necessarily equipped with a "tourist gaze" when looking at the city - a gaze which only superficially recognizes the changes in the cityscape. However superficial, what impressed me was the speed and intensity with which on the one hand the cityscape of central Prague was turned inside out by multinational investors and brands, how it was turned into a „brandscape“ and how on the other hand the landscape along the highway between BRNO and up north in direction to DRESDEN was transformed in some areas into a almost hyperreal hi-tech corridor, defined by a scenographic design of spectacularly placed mega-billboards, giving the work of Kevin Lynch a very contemporary interpretation.

But exactly those corridors and islands of globalized (commercial) space were again and again accompanied by the informal architectures, or "paraarchitecture" - as Anthony Vidler once termed it - of cheap markets, ensembles of kiosks resembling shantytowns, display windows occupied by prostitutes and so on. Of course especially the border-regions were very much defined by those spaces, in which the most brutal antidotes to the clean and smooth zones of the global brandscapes could be found, nevertheless both of them depending on one another. It is exactly this contradictory spatiality, this polarisation of spaces in society and its production of difference which i would like to coin as typical and paradigmatic for the development of central european cities and regions, however different their specific backgrounds and contexts.

I want to ask what terms and strategies Urbanism has developed in order to deal with this phenomenon of spaces of "exacerbated difference", as for example Rem Koolhaas referred to in his reading of the contemporary developments in the chinese metropolises.

Of course the before mentioned phenomena can be seen not only in the remote areas of a country, but also inside the city limits. Borders have multiplied. - The borderline of the nation state has lost its importance as a tool for a national identity by becoming porous through technology as well as migration and mobility of individuals, borderlines have multiplied into new systems of control, surveillance, but sometimes also are produced by technical means of transferrability between codes.

When we look at recent debates in Urbanism on how to deal with the processes of (heterogenisation) and polarisation within a mainly de-regularised state of planning - with the powers of the classic institutions of city-planning in stark decline - i would like to address three core narratives, which are attributed to be driving forces and generators of a "new" Urbanity. - An idea of Urbanity, which reacts with surprisingly similar concepts to the pressures of a increasingly globalised, transnational competition between cities in order to place themselves on the global map. The underlying core of this form of Urbanity might be found in what Tony Bennett called „The Exhibitionary Complex“.

Tony Bennett argues that State intervention in the Arts was part of a more general phenomenon which included the Great Exhibition of 1851, and the opening of the South Kensington Museum in 1857. These exhibitions were successful in transforming the feared mob into an ordered crowd, which became part of the spectacle of the museum itself. This phenomenon, 'the exhibitionary complex', developed from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century and involved 'the transfer of objects and bodies from the enclosed and private domains in which they

had been previously displayed into progressively more open and public arenas.

As Bennett has remarked, that after the opening of museum collections to the general public in the nineteenth century, it seemed necessary to install mechanisms of control and surveillance in order to regulate the behaviour of the visitors: creating long vistas, placing display formations in corridor-like settings, applying watch-points with overviews, creating large spaces unobstructed by columns. Through the extensive use of reflective glass in the showcases, a heightened awareness of the visitors' visibility was created, establishing a politics of visibility in which the visitor is at the same time subject and object of a controlling gaze - a visitor is permanently "on display".

Today's discussion of Urbanity relies very much on interrelated practices and strategies formerly related to the realm of exhibiting: One can observe that practices and mechanisms of Exhibiting became a dominant mode in the rhetoric about cities, from Urban Planning to City Marketing. Today cities are staged experiences, they are put on Display and in the reflecting facades of contemporary Urbanity the inhabitants are put on Display just as well.

Even in planning practices an enormous growth in the energy and money invested in the representations of projects - in Renderings, Visualisations, Presentations - can be observed.

So, when it comes to urbanistic strategies of how to cope with today's cities we can encounter the Exhibitionary Complex in a new form: Let me try to identify three key concepts of this contemporary Complex:

1. There is the theme of deliberate placement of the Masterpiece: **Landmark Buildings**, best maybe exemplified by the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao by Frank Gehry. The seemingly big success of Frank Gehry's building - which in reality turned out to be a financial disaster due to the specific Public-Private Partnership deal - was the role model for loads of projects that desperately held on to the idea that a spectacular Building - mostly related to Arts+Culture - would create such a strong impact that also other pressing urban and social issues could be solved.

2. There is the inflationary Biennial: In the Logic of the **Event City** huge and reoccurring cultural events are of crucial importance in order to keep the level of attention needed to address the growing number of cultural tourists and to keep the destination of the respective city in the media. So in almost each city we can observe an increasing sellout of public space to commercial venues, even if temporary.

3. The mystification of creativity: The term of the **Creative City** has become a buzzword for cities aiming at updating their outmoded infrastructures with new concepts of usage as well as for upgrading the city image on a level of branding. Once a liberating idea within a restrained post-war society the very term "creativity" has become a very pleasing concept for neo-liberal models of shifting responsibilities from the state and its institutions towards the individual.

How much this paradigm has changed can be observed when considering that In 1956 Constant started what would become a visionary architectural project that would stretch out over 20 years. An utopian city that went by the name of New Babylon; it consisted of an almost endless series of scale models, sketches, etchings, collages, further elaborated by manifestoes, lectures, essays and films. The project was a provocation, an explicit metaphor for the Creative City:

Constant writes: *"The modern city is dead; it has been sacrificed to the cult of utility. New Babylon is the project for a city in which people will be able to live. For to live means to be creative. New Babylon is the product of the creativity of the masses, based on the activation of*

the enormous creative potential which at the moment lies dormant and unexploited in the people. New Babylon assumes that as a result of automation non-creative work will disappear, that there will be a metamorphosis in morals and thinking, that a new form of society will emerge."

Today these ideas about creativity still are the driving forces of the idea about the creative city, but very much absorbed by a contemporary economy, that has learned how to make profits out of the promises of emancipation. One of the curators of the project „Be Creative!“, Marion von Osten points to fact, that creativity has changed its cultural meaning and values fundamentally: *"Creativity used to be seen as something peculiar to artists, designers and dissidents. Now it is considered essential for survival in the current labour, attentiveness and relations markets. It is already the social norm to market your own «labour force» as an entrepreneur in your own right, and to use periods without work and temporary appointments efficiently".* and she continues: *"Subcultural practices and non-conformist living models no longer disturb the business flow in a company either, but are even said to increase productivity. Artists (and designers) are taken as the model here."*

The roots of the myths around ideas of creativity are located within the bourgeois understanding of art and the history of the origins of the museum and the art space was central to the constitution of a notion of the bourgeois public sphere. The notion of Urbanity is a legacy of this understanding. Urbanity is intrinsically bound up with the Production of Images, it is in the mechanisms of perception, that Urbanity forms itself as a certain atmosphere. Contemporary Urbanity emancipates itself increasingly from the Territoriality of the City. Its character is defined by its capacity to offer Signs, Codes and Symbols that operate internationally, globally. In that sense Urbanity is a de-territorialising phenomenon; it tries to escape the local agenda in order to imaginarily leave the own city. As Urbanity is the product of a multitude of cities, it homogenizes the space it occupies in a network of transnational places. Significantly, one can observe almost desperate attempts to enhance historic differences and peculiarities at least on the very surface. The sight of free-standing historic facades, where all the internal structures behind have been torn away, has become familiar in cities like Prague or Vienna. History becomes an Image on a screenlike surface, whereas behind these historic screens contemporary architectures contribute to a vast expansion of space which has no inside and no outside anymore. The result are *spaces without places*. The specificity of these spaces is, that they are closely linked to temporality, since the mostly global capital attached to them operates on short term profits. Their power is their threat to move away, as soon as a place seems not profitable anymore. Public-private partnerships, where profits are privatised, but loss is socialised, have become common in most cities, probably also in Prague. Sometimes this sell-out seems acceptable only since it can be argued as temporary. This temporality makes everybody a guest in the city, not only the *global players*, but also the inhabitants themselves. The conversion of the *city of places* into *spaces for a touristic gaze* is part of a general paradigmatic shift in Urbanism to culturalisation and aesthetisation.

The role model for this conversion is the before mentioned *exhibitionary complex*. Scenographic aspects, stagings, events and changeable modes of marketing have become the driving forces of Urbanism. To put the city "on display", to put it "into the best light", to discover "perspectives not yet seen in this way", to "stage its highlights" has become more than just a topic for the communal tourist boards. It has become the hegemonial mode of thinking this specific place. Aesthetisation on the one hand and the retreat of communal governance and planning on the other hand are two sides of one coin. And after the geopolitical changes of 1989 the role of cities as sites of competition in an "economy of attention" (Jonathan Crary) has become ever more inescapable. The alternative not to participate in this competition means to be forgotten, to be invisible. In the contemporary state of things this means not to exist. The imperative to put oneself

on display permanently is becoming a core necessity in contemporary cities

The socially controlling gaze, of which Tony Bennett was still speaking in his Text on the Exhibitionary Complex has meanwhile dissolved into a state of self-control and self-consciousness, perhaps exemplified by what Ulrich Bröckling termed a "democratised Panopticon", which is exemplified by mechanisms such as 360-degree feedbacks, which have become popular techniques in corporate business environments. Here workers are exposed to anonymous evaluations at undeterminable times. The most effective mechanism of control nevertheless operates via the knowledge of the possibility to be observed and evaluated at any point of time. Contrary to the classical Panopticon that Foucault described, there is no hierarchical order in the relations of visibility anymore, but rather an a-hierarchical model of reciprocal visibility: everyone observes anyone. The function of these mechanisms is a combination of increased self-reflection and self-optimization, as well as creating a stabilising and normalising effect overall, since the side effect is a streamlining of social behaviour towards the mainstream.

The artists/architects Diller/Scofidio pointed to the new role of transparency and the inflationary use of glass in contemporary architecture: "*Yesterday's pathologies have become inverted: the fear of being watched has transformed into the fear that no one is watching. Glass is now understood as a surface to look at, not only through. Transparent glass is no longer invisible, rather, it is a display surface that modifies human behavior on either side.*"

Now when we take serious these parallels between contemporary Urbanity and the Exhibitionary Complex we should ask the question of what nature the connections are. If Urbanity more and more operates under the mechanisms of the Exhibitionary Complex and if the role models of the contemporary Urbanite are so closely bound up with the figures of *creative producers*, we should take a closer look at the way *urbanity* and especially the notion of the *public* are discussed today.

There are lots of indicators that the rising amount of art devoted to interventions in the public sphere, the attempts to create provisional, temporary publics, even counter-publics correlates with an increasing instrumentalisation of artistic practices and "creative scenes" as a substitute for a political withdrawal from more and more public and social responsibilities. The British critic Claire Bishop pointed to the rhetoric and interests of *New Labour* in Great Britain as being "*almost identical to socially engaged art to steer culture towards policies of social inclusion*". She critiques the expanded field of "relational practices" for partly surrendering to a neoliberal logic in the sense that lot of these collaborative, participatory practices try to fuse together the fragmented or precarious elements of society.

Even if Bishop's critique is somehow shorthanded and even if she focusses mainly on specific artists in her text, there is a crucial question at the core: do such practices of a public and socially engaged art withdraw from the aesthetic and fuse their agency with a primarily social ambition? Or do these practices bear a potential for creating a different space, a political space that allows to create dissent and contradiction? - In that sense the indicator for the political as such, as Jacques Ranciere put it? Bishop argues with Ranciere that the system of art as we understand it in the west is predicated exactly on a confusion between Art's Autonomy (its removal from rational instrumentality) and Heteronomy (its blurring of art and life): "*But: Untangling this knot - or ignoring it by seeking more concrete ends for art - is slightly to miss the point, since the aesthetic is the ability to think contradiction: The productive contradiction of Art's relationship to social change, characterized precisely by that tension between the faith in Art's Autonomy AND the belief in Art as inextricably bound up with the promise of a better world to come.*"

Independent now from the question, in which specific art works one can discover more or less political potential or "productive contradictions", it is important here, that at the moment the state withdraws increasingly from a social agenda towards urbanism and planning there is a enormous increase in artistic works, that engage with urban spaces, that intervene in public spheres, that create alternative public spheres and so on.

In order not to subjugate these tendencies and activities to a neoliberal idea of engaged individuals taking the responsibilities the communality sold off, one has to think about the way these articulations are organised, in which kind of space they take place. These works and projects usually take place within the frame of an cultural institution, an artspace or museum or a biennial. They are developed by individual artists, by groups, mostly together with curators. But more than just to give space and organisational support, the role of the curator of course plays a crucial role here, even if it is not discussed so much publicly.

In his text "THE CURATORIAL FUNCTION" the philosopher Oliver Marchart asked about the tasks of the curator when it comes to the production of art with a political and public agenda. He defines the role of the curator a provider of a PUBLIC SPHERE. Considering again the definition of the public (according to philosophers like Ranciere) as the site of dissent and antagonism. Here we encounter an important paradox: How can conflict or antagonism be organised? The antagonism, that creates a public sphere can break out anywhere at any time, but it cannot be simply organised. Consequently, Marchart concludes, the CURATORIAL FUNCTION consists in organising the IMPOSSIBLE. But what can that mean?

Even an action in public space is not automatically in itself PUBLIC ART in any political sense. For an exhibition to become a PUBLIC SPHERE, something must be added: A POSITION. The curator Jerome Sans defined exhibiting as EX/POSITION. Positioning and Commitment. Sans: *"An exhibition is a place for debate, not just a public display"*. The paradox of creating a public space consists in marking a COUNTER-POSITION, creating ANTAGONISM. "The publicness of Antagonism always has something disruptive in relation to the logic of the institution and the dominant ideology: it INTERRUPTS regulated processes, responsibilities and hierarchies. The curatorial function, Marchart concludes, consists not least in the political opening of the institution of which it appears to be part of.

Charles Esche concludes: *"Of course, (the curators), the artists, the public institutions and the self-made artists spaces that produce and promote this work are all necessarily located within the economic hegemony of capitalism. They are always already compromised but that compromised position is precisely their advantage. The projects can act as 'engaged autonomous' elements within capitalism, totally inside the system and yet, through their association with the tolerated cultural enclosure called 'art', able to act according to different rules."*

Even if - or maybe just because - the curator is being "exploited" or "glamourised" again and again as a role model because of his/her creative/freelance/global player/ meta-artist image, it might be crucial to insist at the curatorial function as defined by Marchart. Regardless if an artist takes up a curatorial position (which frequently happens) or if other non-professional curators take up such a position, i would argue for a model, in which CURATORS operate as URBANISTS. Or to be more precise: To operate as URBANISTS with the agenda of THE CURATORIAL FUNCTION.

what could be the result? *Curated Cities?*

- maybe not in the sense that star-architects are commissioned to build spectacular buildings, which might turn out to be good for showing up in international media, but leaving local questions

without a space. - maybe not in the sense that one mega event after the other is launched in order to program and market the city according to the ever same schemes of marketing experts - and maybe not in the sense of exploiting clichés of artistic work, emancipation and liberation to neo-liberal means of de-regulation and social decline.

But what could be EXAMPLES of this new kind of Urbanism, that tries to interweave globalised, but more and more meaningless URBANITY with a localized and politicized agenda?

Projects:

NIKEGROUND – Karlsplatz Wien, 2003, by *0100101110101101.org*
<http://www.t0.or.at/nikeground/>

Corviale Network / Osservatorio Nomade – Corviale, 2004, by *Stalker*
http://www.lovedifference.org/eng/network/studies/methods/10-meth1_stalker.pdf
http://www.lovedifference.org/eng/network/studies/methods/methods07/stalker_facing_corviale.pdf

PARKFICTION – Hamburg, 1995-2005, by *Park Fiction Kollektiv*
<http://www.parkfiction.org/>

SUITCASE CITY – Hamburg, 2005, by *Margit Czenki and Christoph Schäfer*
<http://www.wildcapital.net/material/SuitcaseCriminalCity.pdf>

I believe that projects like the ones i showed here can be indicators for another urbanistic practice, that aims not to instrumentalize art for reasons of marketing or gentrification, but because it can offer contradictions, gaps in perception, and sometimes simply spaces that give room for the OTHER.

It is not about creating a newer version of Utopia, but about a form of ENGAGED AUTONOMY.

The curator and writer Charles Esche argued that *"it is especially the field of art, that maintains an area of a questioning, open, permissive and imaginative space for social and economic experimentation. What all this might have to do with the spaces of global capitalism is hopefully that by creating the conditions of possibility at moments and with certain people in the institution, we also permit the kind of imaginative response to the monolith of the free market that provides ways of thinking it otherwise."*

"The practices of artists and groups like the ones i showed are in some ways perfect paradigms of contemporary economy. Pragmatic, flexible, fluid and resourceful, they fit the profile of good entrepreneurs. Indeed, that is their point. BUT: By repurposing the tools of economy, we might find their gaps and inconsistencies; we might give a space to ideas yet unthought, we might be able to re-map and re-organize those existing structures of a failed modernity, that otherwise might disappear and contribute to a historic amnesia." Crucial Importance lies in the of claiming a strategic autonomy in the principle of curating cities. It has to be made clear that success is not

measured in numbers of visitors, but in the sustainable development of heterotopias in cities. - islands, which like in the definition coined by Michel Foucault, describe places and spaces that function in non-hegemonic conditions.

Spaces of the possible OTHER within the SAME, PLACES within SPACES.

By advocating a curatorial approach to Urbanism i do not mean to forget and withdraw questions of urban strategies directed towards the necessity of coping with huge scales, with newly developed areas, but to question how a concept of the the public , the public sphere can be formulated in a way, that corresponds to the needs of societies that become more and more heterogenous, and that occupy a multitude of different spaces, be it virtual or be it real, with a huge variety in the way their specific publicness is defined by their respective boundaries. It is in this respect i believe that we can learn from the debates around the CURATORIAL FUNCTION and the necessity for antagonisms, conflicts, representations of the OTHER and their translations as being a important and defining moment of URBANITY.

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Oliver Marchart: The Curatorial Function - Organizing the Ex/position; in: *Curating Critique*, Revolver, Frankfurt, 2007
Charles Esche: Foreword in *Afterall*, Issue Nr.11
Jaques Ranciere: *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum Inter. Publis.; 2006