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Modes of Spatial Exploration in Berlin: Collaborating with Knut Eckstein on Subverting the City

“Linking the city to the concept never makes them identical, but it plays on their progressive symbiosis: to plan a city is both to *think the very plurality* of the real and to make that way of thinking the plural *effective*; it is to know how to articulate it and be able to do it”.¹ Michel de Certeau

“Not to find one’s way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one’s way around the city, as one loses one’s way in a forest requires some schooling. Street names must speak to the urban wanderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and little streets in the heart of the city must reflect the times of day, for him, as clearly as a mountain valley. This art I acquired rather late in life; it fulfilled a dream, of which the first traces were labyrinths on the blotting papers in my school notebooks.”² Walter Benjamin

The inspiration in doing this project was the thought of a type of getting lost in Berlin, but getting lost in some areas seemingly familiar. They are sites I have walked by and through for years. They are located in centers of a city, which, however, lacks a real sense of centrality. In one location, the area around the Kulturforum, the space is transitional in nature, it is surrounded by the Berlin Philharmonic and the museums, but doesn’t appear as a destination, place of respite or interest. Rather, it is an open urban landscape seen on the way to somewhere else. The other site, however, is often experienced as a tourist destination. Bebelplatz runs along Unter den Linden, arguably Berlin’s most famous street and the one that led to the Stadtschloß, now under reconstruction. It is framed by the Staatsoper and was the site of the 1933 book burning.

As both spaces are highly visible, the tendency is all the more present to contain them within conventions of seeing and urban narratives of projected meanings. While it would not be possible to physically get lost in either the Kulturforum area or Babelplatz, I asked the artist Knut Eckstein to engage with me in a labyrinth of associations in exploring them in August 2015. Berlin does exist as a plurality of ideas on the planning level. It has been and is still constantly being thought and re-thought and its urban fabric can reveal the condensation of representations. In the 1990s, for example, the question as to the representation of the new Potsdamer Platz was posed and presented the challenge of inserting a new square into an

¹ de Certeau, Michel, 1984 and 1988. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, p. 56.

² Benjamin, Walter, 1950 and 2006. *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. by Howard Eiland, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, p. 54.

historical and historically charged space.³ As much of the attraction of the original Potsdamer Platz was due the “unplanned liveliness”⁴ of the ensemble, which was then extinguished through the developments of National Socialism, the effects of World War II and the Cold War.

Brian Ladd describes Berlin as a haunted city in which memories “often cleave to the physical settings of events” and the buildings and places have many stories to tell.⁵ New projects, therefore, are condensations between old and new and point simultaneously to the past and the future. The pasts to draw from, however, are diverse and the plurality of the metropolis is often faced with the simplification of complex trajectories into a seemingly coherent urban image. In this paper the city is opened up as a train of associations in which the experience of the city may be situated between outer conditions and a playful engagement with them allowing for unseen but present meanings to be brought into focus. This line of thought is informed by object relations theory and the ideas of Donald Winnicott of experience as a creative act in which the object of experience may be both present and created by the subject.⁶ Experience lies in a gulf between subject and object in a potential space in which the line between self and other is blurred.⁷ Understanding this transitional aspect of space allows for potential meanings to be brought into focus.

Urban experience may be situated in a potential space, in which the city is an imagined site for the projection of new architectures and urban ensembles as alternative models contrasting or negating the present forms of the city. The potential city is also a collection of objects merging together with subjects and inciting a chain of associations so that the real is intertwined with the imaginary. Christopher Bollas speaks of a dream-like relationship with objects in which an intermediate space is entered and in which the subject is inhabited by inner constellations of psychic realities.⁸ Thinking of the city in terms of a potential or intermediate space allows for it to be unlocked to otherwise invisible trajectories so that the real in its totality is negated by what could be, what was, and what is present, but unarticulated.

In *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, Jane Rendell investigates the intermedial and engages with it as a methodology of spatial practice in which critical relationships of time, space and the social are emphasized. Approaching art and

³ Ladd, Brian, 1997. *The Ghosts of Berlin*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 120.

⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 121.

⁵ *Ibidem.*, p. 1.

⁶ Winnicott, Donald. 1971 and 2005. *Playing and Reality*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 18.

⁷ *Ibidem.*, p. 55.

⁸ Bollas, Christopher, 1992. *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self Experience*, Routledge, London, p. 61.

architecture through critical spatial practice, new interdisciplinary points of contact are established.⁹ In discussing walking as spatial practice, Rendell formulates, “The spatial story acts as a theoretical device that allows us to understand the urban fabric in terms of narrative relationships between spaces, times and subjects.”¹⁰ Reflectively walking through the city, a critical art practice advanced by the Situationist International, objects of the city may be re-arranged to think their various configurations in terms of what normally remains invisible. In the following, sites in Berlin will not only be re-imagined in terms of a critical and subversive thinking of the city, but the labyrinth of the potential city will be considered

The Space of Kulturforum

Walking through the city of Berlin along Potsdamer Street onto the Kulturforum one encounters a bleak space currently (August 2014) signed as such with the graffiti “Raum” – space – sprayed on a rusted steel plate on the concrete bank of the forum square. The open area stretching from Hans Scharoun’s Berlin Philharmonie (1963) to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s New National Gallery has been conceived of in many different ways.

The ensemble of cultural institutions was intended to counter the Berlin Museum Island with the Old National Gallery, which was included in the Soviet sector of the city. Potsdamer Square, once one of the busiest commercial centers in Europe, lies just north of the Kulturforum and became one of the most prominent symbols of the city’s division, as it remained a vacant, desolate territory. The once vibrant center was divided by the Berlin Wall and was the “no-man’s land” until the opening up of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and German Reunification in 1990. It then remained a contested site for some time afterwards due to the many proposals for the reconstructions of the center with opposing concepts of how the urban center should appear, and in fact how it could become a center again.

Potsdamer Platz is today a business and entertainment district, often associated with the Berlin’s annual film festival, the Berlinale and the Sony Center (Helmut Jahn, 1998-2000). The Potsdamer Platz has, however, become a collection of highrises which themselves convey different urban concepts. The high-tech glass aesthetic of Sony Center, for instance, is strongly contrasted by the historicizing eclecticism of the brick-clad Kollhoff Tower (Hans Kollhoff, 1994-1999) diagonally across from Sony Center. And while Hans Scharoun’s (1967-68) Staatsbibliothek (State Library) once looked out over the void surrounding the Berlin wall, it now backs Renzo Piano’s Theater am Potsdamer Platz (finished 1998). The Staatsbibliothek once stood as a border of the Kulturforum, separating it off from emptiness of the bombed-out Potsdamer Platz. Now the Staatsbibliothek and Theater am Potsdamer Platz appear to turn their backs on each other. As Potsdamer Platz has been re-designed and transformed into a tourist destination, the

⁹ Rendell, Jane, 2006. *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, London, I.B. Tauris, pp. 1-2.

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 188.

Kulturforum appears desolate. And as an emphasis has been placed on the restoration and re-conceptualization of the museum of the Museumsinsel in the historic city center, the former Soviet sector, the purpose of the Kulturforum has been called into question.

As Nikolaus Bernau explains, the forum was planned by Scharoun in the 1960s as type of Stadtkrone (City Crown) in which a utopian concentration of art and culture should evolve.¹¹ It was designed according to the ideal of an open and automobile-orientated urban space.¹² Today the elements of the Kulturforum stand in isolation to each other, and as an automobile-orientated space, it may not seem a place, as Bernauer notes, congenial to the flâneur.¹³ Concepts of what the Kulturforum should be continue to be formulated and debated, so that there are utopian ideals of the Kulturforum, which sharply diverge from what the forum currently is and has been. And a type of potentiality transpires from this discrepancy between the lived and the envisioned space, which is characteristic for the city of Berlin and which speaks to the nature of space, as a movement between the phenomenal situation and a field of associations.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes, “The desire to see the city preceded the means of satisfying it”.¹⁴ The perspectival image of the city allowed for a vision of it that at the time of its inception, remained a fiction.¹⁵ De Certeau understands the drive to see the city as image – scopic drive- as totalizing. Urban complexity is simplified, but “Escaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible”.¹⁶ The space of the Kulturforum does as yet escape any totalizing vision as its evocative, but disparate elements (Neue Nationalgalerie, Philharmonie, Gemäldegalerie, etc.) do not correlate into a unified vision. “Raum” painted onto the site of the forum, invites the recipient to see space beyond any totalizing spectacle of it. Once reflected upon, the site becomes a series of associations and finds, which the visitor is allowed to investigate on his/her own. The unassuming Gemäldegalerie, for example, houses one of Europe’s premier but infrequently visited painting collections. Slopping upwards from Matthäi-Kirchplatz, the extensive terrace leading into the museum complex (designed by Hilmer & Sattler und Albrecht, 1998) obscures the interior volume. While the terrace incline may sense as inhospitable to the museum guest, it was once frequented by skate-boarders who appreciated the multiple levels and

¹¹ Bernau, Nikolaus, 2014. Kulturforum Berlin. Das gescheiterte Ideal, Berliner Zeitung Feb. 02, 2014, accessed Aug. 10, 2014, <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur/kulturforum-berlin-das-gescheiterte-ideal,10809150,26067654.html>

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 92.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 93.

open space, but are now kept out through newly installed barriers, prohibiting this illegal activity.

The Tension of Creative Space

Spray-painting and skate-boarding utilizes the forum in a non-intended and non-sanctioned manner. Discussing risk, public space and skate-boarding, Iain Borden sees skate-boarding as a means of creating tension in public space “For example, skateboarding implies that architecture can be *micro-spaces* and not just grand monuments, that we can produce not only things and objects but also desires and energies, that public space is for use rather than exchange, that one should use the public realm regardless of who one is or what one owns, and that the way we use public space is an essential factor of who we are”.¹⁷ Non-intentional use of space, creates a tension, as well as a sense of playfulness and discovery of space. In discussing image and movement in cinema, Gilles Deleuze speaks of the “power of the false” as a thinking that which is not thought or seeing that which is not seen through disturbance.¹⁸ Irritation as a juxtaposition of heightened artificialities may perform as an inducement to thinking. In the urban environment, the dissonance of spatial trajectories often contain a potentiality for experiencing environments beyond their unified vision. Thinking of and treating the urban environment as potential space allows for new constellations to evolve that transgress the ordered and planned experience of it. Art production as creative activity involves a practice of space in the potential sense. Potential space, understood in reference to Donald Winnicott, lies between illusion and reality, between subjectivity and objectivity.¹⁹ It is a type of playing in that objects are engaged with in a manner exceeding the objectified understanding of them. The subject is creator of the objects, just as much as the objects exist in and of themselves.²⁰

Installation as détournement

Following in this direction, I would like to turn from urban space to art production based on a constructive understanding of ephemeral and base materials in the art of Knut Eckstein and then return with him in looking at city as a potential space. Bringing out the potentiality of space in his work, the Berlin-based artist Knut Eckstein disturbs the totalizing formulation of spatial-visual orders. In 2009, I collaborated with the artist in working on an exhibition thematizing public space in

¹⁷ Borden, Iain, 2008. Performance, Risk and the Public Realm, in: Sophie Wolfrum and Winfried Nerdinger (Eds.), *Multiple City: Urban Concepts 1908/2008*, Jovis, Berlin, pp., 154-158, 155.

¹⁸ Deleuze, Gilles, 1985 and 2008. *Cinema 2*, Trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, Continuum, London, p. 163.

¹⁹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 55.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 53-55.

Giessen, Germany.²¹ We asked him to contribute a work that would facilitate open debate and reflection upon public space in the exhibition *zwölfteinhalf* (twelve and one half). Knut Eckstein produced spatial elements out of wood-supported cardboard boxes, covered over with car-paint. The main structure was a raft-like platform that visitors could sit on during talks, or which podium discussions could be held on. While functioning as a meeting place, the object is also a representation of urban collectivity. It recalls the improvised kinds of meeting places found in the city where found objects can be occupied and transformed into meeting spaces.

Cardboard boxes are a constant throughout Knut Eckstein's work. Cardboard is a material synonymous with market culture and the transport of goods. The modular disposable cube forms embody a type of transience representational of contemporary living. Signs and images are also interspersed in these constructions. Knut titled the Giessen project *détournement* in reference to the Situationist technique of taking elements from commercial culture and subverting but engaging with them in another context.²² Elements of the entertainment industry appear in *détournement*, for example as advertisements and film announcements attached to cardboard stele. Kino (Cinema) written in cable-light hung from the ceiling at the entrance of the exhibition, suggesting that the ensemble could function as a theater, which it did on one occasion. But whereas commercial signs entice us to consume based on monetary exchange value, *détournement* invited the visitor to communicate in a social setting and playfully engage with each other. In researching for the exhibition, the artist spoke with the students regarding the history of the 1968 protests in Gießen, city known for its leftist base. The theme of protest and finding a collective space had become very topical with the threat of tuition fees and cuts to the university's budget, bringing students to protest in the Hessen state capital Wiesbaden.

Communicating in a non-marketable sense and proposing the idea of a collective space could be regarded as further qualities of the subversive and I think this is an aspect brought in Knut Eckstein's constructions: imaginative communication. But I have asked him to insert his own thoughts here on the notion of disobedience, urban space and his work. We will take this collaboration as a point of departure for exploring and reflecting upon public space in Berlin.

Knut Eckstein Speaking on the Strategy of the Provisional

I started thinking about the installation for Giessen from the perspective of the importance of the 68' student protests that occurred in this small university city that lacks any other comparable big event to commemorate. The first footage

²¹ This was part of a series of exhibitions titled *Kunstgeschichte und zeitgenössische Kunst* – Art History and Contemporary Art – organized by Prof. Marcel Baumgartner and the Institute of Art History at the Justus Liebig University in Gießen together with the Neuer Kunstverein Gießen under the directorship of Markus Lepper, <http://www.giessen-tourismus.de/de/termine-tickets/ausstellungen/269/>

²² Sadler, Sadler, 1998. *The Situationist City*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, p. 44.

images I found on the web displayed an organization of meetings in public space that can be formulated as a (re)action of civil disobedience. The demonstrators were even using signs and signals that are forbidden in public (e.g. the Swastika) to protest against the so-called leading class opinion and power. This led to the contribution of an installation piece that fits the needs of meeting and discussing in public at an exhibition hall. Insisting on the importance of entering the artwork, sitting on it, thus recalls "sit-in's" from the 60s to make it work as a critical platform for thought and meaning. Making the surface like liquid and moldy, like scratched and tagged through the use of high-gloss car paint and other materials, I tried to get the user intrigued and disgusted at the same moment and to make him/her become aware that a user of the space has to possibly overcome his/her own borders to make a conscious decision of thinking differently. Also to be inside or invited to a communicative open space, to commemorate the city itself in the installation, I also used the cable-light sign at the entrance of the exhibition reading "Kino" from its backside.

To me it's important to transform a given formation of ground/space or meaning in a way to work out new content beyond its legalized understanding.

Ephemeral materials, velocity and rawness get almost no common allowance in public, but point out the moment of transgression and transition into new orders, rules or alignment. Searching for borders to destabilize, views to shift, rules to scrutinize or to question, in 2002 I set up a temporary large scale rope-light sign and deliberately vague cardboard box installation on a scaffolding beam marking the entrance to a big construction site for a future fun park called spacepark. The signified corporate identity confused the viewer in its layout and presentation and led to questioning the whole site.

The fun park actually closed down again after only 3 months of operating.

2010: After being invited to the show 'open light in private space', I decided to alter a space implicitly private (a small garden house) into a refreshment stand. Its deliberately provisional sign of one of the best internationally known beverages brand hung free floating over the rooftop of the hut inviting the viewer to enter and use an oversized commercial vending machine inside the small hut to get a self-labeled beverage from the above mentioned brand subverting its image and philosophy.

2012, Budapest: I set up a high bamboo scaffolding hung on the façade of a contemporary 5-story building displaying the multilayered logo of one of the biggest oil companies in the world and an accompanying double yellowish red star that is illegal in Hungary at the moment if it is displayed in red. This conveys a reading of corporate identities in ambiguous ways when connected to historical facts of both German and Hungarian history.

In the same way, a comparably small work *brandsatz* (brand or fire and sentence) from 2012, material: cable-light, bamboo, wire, 8 x 3 x 2 m, consults the role of signifier and signified in its title and visualization.

Collaborative Drifting at Bebelplatz

In considering how a critically artistic approach to space could broaden its conventional modus of perception, we questioned the role that signs play in charging spaces with content. We propose that a subversively playful approach to the built environment can detour meaning systems and open it up to thinking in terms of the provisional in which potential associations are brought to consciousness. Exploring Berlin, we were drawn to a counterpole to Potsdamer Platz: Bebelplatz on Unter den Linden. Like Potsdamer Platz, it is a representational area, which is currently in a state of transition. Also known as the Forum Fredericianum, it evolved as a realization of King Frederick II's (Frederick the Great's) plans for a cultural center and consisted of the Royal Opera House (today the State Opera House), St. Hedwig's Cathedral, the Royal Library (today a part of the Humboldt University and the Prince Heinrich Palais (today the main building of Humboldt University).²³ It represented Prussian Berlin as cultural center and as place of tolerance (the Catholic cathedral in the Protestant kingdom) and later was transformed into a site of intolerance when National Socialist students burnt the books of hundreds of writers, publicists, philosophers and scientists on May 10, 1933.²⁴ The event is now remembered through the memorial *Bibliothek* (Library, 1995) by the Israeli artist Micha Ullman and a plaque with a quote by the German-Jewish writer Heinrich Heine, "That was only a prelude, there where they burn books, in the end they burn people" (1820). *Bibliothek* is easily overlooked as it consists of an underground and empty library which can only be viewed through a glass plate, which often more reflects back those looking into it. Following World War II, the ensemble became part of the Soviet Sector and was renamed Bebelplatz in 1947 after the August Bebel, a co-founder of the Social Democratic Party and publicist.²⁵

Bebelplatz is thus a site of layered and conflicted histories, and is momentarily dominated by large construction containers used for the extensive and long renovations of the State Opera House. A main signifier of the area's history, a statue of Frederick the Great, is now covered with scaffolding, transforming it into a type of playground object. What interested us in the area was not in fact its representational character, but a new level of meaning which it momentarily calls up through the containers and graffiti on the large clock in the square reading "refugees welcome" and "§ 23 Bleiberecht". Paragraph 23 refers to the "right of residency" for those seeking asylum for humanitarian reasons, which has been a very current theme throughout Europe with debates taking place on the rights of asylum seekers and also as to the problem of appropriate housing for the refugees.

²³ Böhne Carl-Georg, Schmidt, Werner, 2000. *Unter den Linden. Ein Spaziergang von Haus zu Haus*, Haude and Spener, Berlin, pp. 78-86.

²⁴ Roth, Andrew, Frajman, Michael, 1999. *Das jüdische Berlin heute*, trans. by Elisabeth Seligmann, Quadriga, Berlin, p. 101.

²⁵ Böhme and Schmidt, *Unter den Linden*, p. 78.

Since ideal views of Bebelplatz are now obscured by the building containers and scaffolding, images of opera performances are being displayed around the construction area and remind the visitor that there is in fact an opera house there. Groups of tourists are guided through the square and told how to comprehend the square, as its importance is not so readily apparent. There is a tension between how the area should be, how it now is, and how it could be. The subversiveness is a potentiality inherent in the urban ensemble - as its objects now (provisionally) relate to each other - that hijacks the vision of the space through an insertion of an opposed and imagined spatial experience.