

Utopia and Monument – Project Series 2009-2010

In their very essence, and sometimes at the very heart of a space in which the characteristics of a society are most recognizable and commonplace, monuments embody a sense of transcendence, a sense of being elsewhere. They have always been u-topic. Throughout their height and depth, along a dimension that was alien to urban trajectories, they proclaimed duty, power, knowledge, joy, hope. – Henry Lefebvre¹

... before it is the exercise of power or the struggle for this power, politics is the dividing up of a specific space of "common affairs"; it is the conflict determining which objects will enter and which will not enter this space, the conflict determining who will participate in this space and who will not. – Jacques Rancière²

As a multi-disciplinary festival for new art held annually since 1968, steirischer herbst looks back on a series of innovative urban art projects, known to occasionally also spark controversy, that have by and large imprinted strong visual sensations on the public sphere. A diverse range of manifestations in outdoor space have been involved in practically all developmental phases: from autonomous sculptures in urban space or in the countryside, grouped in sculpture parks, public actions, and performances, to site-specific works with contemporary-historical references, such as poster projects, to activist and interventionist artistic practices with the intention of spotlighting fringe groups or of even helping contribute to the amelioration of their social situation. "An uncompromising art that emerges in the Lebensraum of the people, unprotected by the White Cube of art sites, never fails to cause a stir, or even massive resistance."³ These words signal the introduction of a special website representing the full scope of art that has been permanently and temporarily realised 'off-site' in Graz since 1945.

Following many years of trench warfare about artistic manifestations in the public sphere, political and economic policy-makers have now discovered the potential of current art as an economic factor and a magnet for tourism, understanding how to implement it as a marketing instrument. The artists themselves in the role of producers – such as those local citizens selected to *have* a part (*Teilhabe*) or even those groups invited to *take* part (*Teilnahme*) – do not always feel particularly comfortable in the functions assigned to them. Analysing various instances of linguistic usage in museum exhibitions ('I have an exhibition') and in works in public space ('I have a public art commission'), Daniel Buren speculates as to whether there "might be some truth in this dual, controlled characterisation", namely, whether artists "can actually express themselves freely and without directives"⁴ in museum space, or if a public art commission more closely resembles the execution of mandates. "The city" – according to Buren, who advocates that one in this context should rather speak of a 'public art commission' or a 'permanent exhibition in the street' – "has yet to be conquered".⁵ He goes on to assert that 'working for the street means calling into question more than 100 years of artistic production for museums. It also means stepping down from one's pedestal'.⁶

Parallel to the development of art, public space itself has undergone a significant transformation. The almost unrestrained advancing privatisation and economisation of public space and its

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subjection to a culture of spectacle and governmental control had already been criticised in the mid-1970s by philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who describes space as a social product and medium. In his thesis on the 'Production of Space'⁷ Lefebvre points to the conflict "between a space that is increasingly becoming an exchange value and a yet inhabited space that only has use value to the extent that the exchange value has failed to succeed in totally destroying or making it disappear."⁸ The 'capitalist space' – according to Lefebvre – is, for the perspectival space familiar to us from the Renaissance, the 'place of deterioration'. The buildings lack alignment, have been divested of a facade, and are situated in an "indifferent space and are even indifferent to this space, which is moving toward total quantification".⁹

Respecting this much-discussed scenario of urban spaces, a no less radical shift of private and public property becomes apparent; one that is dominated by the effects of global, neoliberal finance. Having already faced strong censure several years ago was the sale of public facilities to foreign investors yielding high tax benefits as carried out by many municipal authorities, including those in Austria, which, on the opposite end, entails high rental payments for the use of the same facilities (so-called 'cross-border leasing'). The fact that many companies that have until recently been purely privately operated are now, due to the current financial crisis, being run with government involvement – yet without the new partner having a voice – is causing many to wonder how this hybrid of ownership should henceforth proceed. Here the paradoxical situation may arise in which companies that have so far been dedicated to involvement with public art institutions as private-sector sponsors suddenly find themselves predominantly state-owned, and where the dogma 'public-private partnership' – evoked in favour of Austrian federal museums while relieving the strain on taxpayers – mutates into a magnification of the partnership with the government, whose share had actually been intended to be kept at a minimum.

In fact, we are being confronted with a paradigm shift in all areas of society, and the question arises as to how we are to respond. Over the preceding years much has been said about civil society and the importance of the entire population – in its full cultural and social multifariousness – taking over responsibility for and actively sharing in the art and culture of one's country. How can the public or, moreover, how can the various publics be addressed in artworks? Are we forced to helplessly succumb to the occupation of both the public and the private spheres? Or is this all just 'talk' and, practically speaking, of no direct consequence to us in concrete everyday life anyhow? In the face of these developments and debates, the steirischer herbst festival is launching a two-year project called **Utopia and Monument**. While the concept of utopia always signifies a view toward the future and characterises non-locality as a desirable state, the monument is an object of memory aimed at the calling to mind of an event that occurred in the past and is now perpetually occupying a certain place. In view of these contrarities between utopia and monument, the project will pursue the reciprocal interplay between autonomy, aesthetics and politics.

Industrious projects have repeatedly investigated whether art can function as an instrument for the concrete shaping of our environment and as a vehicle for attaining necessary insight in societal relations. But, as Reinhard Braun stated, what if the desired aim – namely, art becoming engaged in tangible societal circumstances – "is not achieved, with it instead perhaps even being positioned in competition thereto?" With artistic practices "mirroring their own logic in public space and ending up generating a conflicting relationship?" And with artists not necessarily "working toward

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making visible a fragment of the injustice in the world (but that is itself possibly a result of this injustice)? How can the validity of visual arts as an important cultural field be asserted in such a project? Can the public as a space for debates, for 'talk', opinions, and interests even be reclaimed after having been commercially 'ruled' to such an extent?"¹⁰

Lefebvre indicates that "a much too common image of space is to be corrected, namely, the concept or the notion that space is an empty container and indifferent to its material content. Between the containing and the contained, between the form and its contents, there is a much more strict and deep relationship as that of mutual indifference".¹¹ The utopian potential addressed here is further elaborated by Rancière: "Art is political foremost in the way in which it configures a spatiotemporal *sensorium* through determining the different ways of being together or apart, inside or outside, in front of or in the midst of (...). If art is political, then only to the extent that the spaces and temporalities that it divides up and the forms of occupation of this temporality and these spaces that it determines interfere with the division of spaces and temporalities, subjects and objects, the private and the public, the competent and the incompetent, which defines a political community".¹²

'All the Same – What is valid if everything is valid?' – the question of our society's value systems, set as leitmotif for the 2009 steirischer herbst festival – will thus be encountered in the area of the visual arts by pertinent explorative questions on public and private space. To this aim, an exhibition format will be implemented that is, based on previous experiences with similar projects, discursively oriented, but which will set a clear tone for the public. Unlike institutions with individual facilities, steirischer herbst possesses not only the need but also the access and opportunities necessary to be able to physically realise such projects. This potential will indeed be maximised over the course of the next two years.

The first part of **Utopia and Monument** places its focus on the question of **'the validity of art between privatisation and the public sphere'**, thus concentrating on the thesis of the loss of public space. These explorative questions will be illuminated – in projects by artists as well as in walking conferences and workshops with researchers, critics, and theorists – through the highlighting of individual case studies, and so forth, while striving for a (re)appropriation of the public by means of works that have been primarily individually commissioned and produced for the exhibition in downtown Graz. **Utopia and Monument II** will then subsequently be thematically explored in detail based on acquired experiences and in relation to the leitmotif of the 2010 steirischer herbst festival.

Sabine Breitwieser, March 2009 / June 2009

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 22. Thanks to Reinhard Braun for the reference note.

² Jacques Rancière, 'The Politics of Art and its Paradoxes,' trans. David Quigley, *Brumaria* 9 (Fall 2007), pp. 331–32.

³ <http://offsite.kulturserver-graz.at>, as of March 2009

⁴ Daniel Buren, 'Kann die Kunst die Straße erobert', in *Zeitgenössische Skulptur: Projekte in Münster 1997*, ed. Klaus Bußmann (Hatje Cantz, 1997), p. 485.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 493.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 499.

⁷ *La production l'espace* (1974). English version: Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: OX, 1991).

⁸ Henri Lefebvre, 'Die Produktion des städtischen Raums', in *An Architektur 01, Material zu: Lefebvre, Die Produktion des Raumes* (July 2002).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰ Reinhard Braun in an email to the author.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹² Jacques Rancière, 'The Politics of Art and its Paradoxes,' pp. 331–32.

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