Acting out into the city: artistic intervention as production of urban public space.

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We are living in the time of urban spectacle. Contemporary art projects, booming across the globe, are an integrate part of the rapid expansion of this spectacle. In the last decade, Asian Cities are "catching up" with this wave with even more intense and tsunami-like enthusiasm, along with the unprecedented urban growth, marked by the latest Beijing Olympics spectacles and urban explosion.

In the meantime, ironically, we are also witnessing a dramatic trend of privatisation, gentrification and social division taking place every where. Public spaces are being increasingly reduced while civil society and democracy are being threatened under the pressure of "liberal" global capitalism that, with the complacence of various political powers, is becoming the homogenising and even monopolising model of economic, cultural and social production and exchange. Social justice, equality and solidarity are being destroyed while protests and resistance are being mounted from the bottom of the society. A key element of this conflict is certainly the destruction of public space that has been a physical, political and cultural guarantee of social participation and sharing, the very foundation of democracy. How can artistic activities and public events still make sense as a force to preserve and produce public spaces in order to provide platforms for debates on and imaginative solutions to the crucial questions of the function of contemporary art in a civil society is now much more urgent and decisive than ever. How can we understand the new notion of public space and its relation with the private? What are the dynamics and outcomes of this kind of negotiation? What's the role of art in the process? What kind of new strategies and paradigms of public intervention can be invented in the making of public art events? What'll be the ultimate impacts on the transformation of society in the age of globalisation and global spectacle?

Last year, at the end of the 10th Istanbul Biennial that I curated, I had a chance to answer questions by the Turkish art and architecture critic Pelin Tan in an interview conducted by her. The conversation, in the current context – both related to the project *Platform* in Seoul, and the Global Institute of the 7th Gwangju Biennial, which are showing an increasing interests in questioning and realising public art projects in the time of the dominance of the spectacle and consumerist culture, can be seen as a theoretic and practical reference to deal with the abovementioned questions.

PT: As the public space is layered with a lot of several different presentations, ideologies and roots nowadays; how artistic practices can intervene to it; is it possible that art can create counter-publics; or does the idea of "counter-public" remain as a romantic leftist wish?

HHR: Actually, this is a question about what kind of society we are living in today. Are we witnessing a general privatisation of urban spaces all around the world in the trend of globalisation and imposition of a rather monopoly-like model of trans-national capitalism? It seems this is increasingly true. At the same time, all kinds of local authorities, from the state to municipalities, have been accommodating this trend by adjusting and changing urban regulations (often "liberating" them), even in the most undemocratic and corrupt ways. However, one can also observe, on the other hand, more and more social initiatives, ranging from individuals to NGOs, are now struggling to invent and develop visions and strategies of resistance to such a trend. This includes various forms of "informal" economy, alternative organisations and cultural, social and political projects, not to forget environmental activism… Ultimately, they claim for urban renovation with respects to historical diversity and future protection of public goodness without excluding relative individual rights as alternatives to tabula-rasa options and gentrification. This kind of confrontations and conflicts between the monopolizing and diversifying trends, between privatisation and claim for public-ness, etc. has turned the debate of public/private spaces into a much more dynamic, interactive and open one, rather than traditional dogmatic and ideological determinism. Like contemporary culture and urbanism, driven by the reality

of recomposition of economic, social, cultural and social forces, with new tools of technology and global communication, the debate on how to redefine the nature and relationship of public and private spaces has become ever more open and essentially grounded on a "relationalist" view (ex. David Harvey's division of urban space-time in terms of the absolute, relative and relational, and his emphasis on the key and unifying role of the latest, ref. David Harvey: "Space as a Key Word", in "Spaces of Global Capitalism, towards a theory of uneven geographical development", Verso, 2006) that articulate the dynamism of the relational and the negotiation. It's a lived space, and continues to generate new forms of life. It echoes the concept and function of the multitude promoted by Toni Negri and others as a new force of social transformation to propose "alternative" views of globalisation that is based on the diversity. To talk about public space in today's urban conditions, especially in the context of global cities, is about launching constant interventions in this relational understanding and acting and making new proposals to "defend" and promote public good in terms of space and time. Therefore, the division and relation between public and private spaces are no longer static and absolute, even not dialectic (hence relative) but interactive and multidimensional. The question of who and how to occupy a given space is the key element in determine the nature of the space, while one should systematically embrace the potentiality of change of the space itself. As Toni Negri and Michael Hardt point out, there is no more "outside" to the current "global system" ("the Empire"), including the intense struggle between privatisation and defence of public good. What is important is to develop visions, strategies and actions to incessantly, momentarily and effectively take over urban spaces (whether under gentrification or not) and introduce new natures and utilities for public interests – a complexity and often contradictory assembling of diverse claims. It needs realistic and efficient views and actions. In this case, "traditional", "leftist", "romantic" and even "utopian" ideas and strategies such as Hakim Bey's "Temporary Autonomous Zone" can be revised and adapted to the new dynamism and become totally realistic. It's also here that one conceive new concepts and projects of public art practices.

Today, public art should no longer be of simply static, finished and closed forms (whether it's monumental or intimate, spectacular or "immaterial"). Instead, it should emphasize on the open-ended, ever evolving, participatory, collaborative and ultimately anti-eternal. It functions like an ever-running machine of production of social relationship via proposals for dialogues and collaboration between individuals, as a form of laboratory of collective actions to generate common interests. It's a kind of test ground for urban changes that lead to a better equilibrium of diverse interests (of individual, collective and social entities) and propositions to envisage various systems of value beyond the grasp of capitalism. Therefore, contemporary public art can take the most diverse forms, which are often trans-disciplinary, somewhere between "art" and "architecture", between stable structures and performative, time-based actions, with an on-going challenge to attempts to freeze it in any dogma. It's fundamentally experimental and penetrates in all domains of our everyday life and communication, in both "real world" and "virtual world"… it's a dense and intense platform for debates and trials to produce new urban forms and activities. It's not about making any fixed form of "counter-public", but ever-renewing public-ness striving for new relevance. It's not a simple utopia, but a kind of realisable utopia…

(There have been numerous successful examples of this kind of public art initiatives across the world. Personally, many of my curatorial projects have included aspects of this kind of experiments. The insistence on biennial-triennial projects as firmly "local" events to produce new localities in the face of globalisation is a central principle of this practice. Some projects such as "the Fifth System" and "Trans(cient) Ctiy", among others, are even more obvious projects to quasi uniquely search for the new status and strategies of public art in the urban conditions of global cities that carry out agendas of globalisation in different cultural, historic and political backgrounds, from "post-planning reality" to construction of European Capital of Culture…)

PT: In the 60s social movements were powerful; and Wallerstein /Balibar wrote and analysed the social movements (mostly activist) that become part of forming the society; nowadays part of contemporary art practices are creating political and social gestures; according to that; I think some art practices seem becoming a type of social - cultural movement. What can be the outcome of it; do

you think this role of art can harm the autonomy of art practices? or art can be effected in directly intervening the transformation of alternative society and culture ?

HHR: There are many ways to understand and practise art. It's totally legitimate and necessary to consider art as a part of the large social, activist movement. It's not only a tradition dated from the time of classic avant-garde, that has never totally interrupted… The contemporary economic, cultural social, political and especially geopolitical conditions, prompted by the rapid paces of globalisation, are actually making this activist aspect more necessary and urgent than ever. Today, art, like many other cultural activities, is at once a local and global activity. In fact, discourses and concepts largely circulated in the art world to create an intellectual backbone for the materialisation of imaginations, energies, emotions, and creativities, of the artists are largely referring to discourses, theories and debates on post-colonialism, globalisation, critique of capitalism and urbanism, etc. Art has never been as "theoretical" as it is today, and as open to other fields as it is today. The assumption that art should be autonomous, transformed into a kind of dogmatism in the modernist period, has entirely lost its relevance and validity. It's true that art should somehow maintain its particular role via developing its particular language. But this does not mean it should be "autonomous". Instead, it is its direct and indirect involvement and engagement with social reality that can provide it the necessary "source of inspiration" and linguistic, formal and intellectual references. It's a part of the (whatever) social movement. This interactive process is exactly the process in which new linguistic and formal expressions are created and obtain new originality. Certainly, art is a particular part of it, probably the most advanced part of it, a kind of avant-garde, or laboratory of new ideas, projects and actions… it's here that it gains its public-ness. In this sense, the more socially significance an art work can produce, the more powerful it is. No doubt, it is an effective catalysis of social transformation. It's effective-ness lies exactly in the undefined, ever evolving, in-between spaces of the social world, reacting directly and indirectly to various social momentums as a force of critique, proposal and even realisation – a kind of prototype of social transformation.

PT: As our main problem in this century seems "sheltering", "dwelling" in neo-liberal urban sprawl and resisting against the violation of the rights of claiming "place" and "dwelling" and keeping our rights on "city"; what do you art practices can play role in collaborating against it? do you think art practices can only create gestures consuming as a new topic in art or urban sphere or can it be really operative in bringing several actors together for creating alternative resistance platform?

HHR: Yes, it's extremely important to point out that global cities are a complex and contradiction terrain that generate different interests and shortcomings for different populations in different parts of the world. It's truly exciting and euphoric to witness the urban booms across the world from Istanbul to Shanghai, from Sao Paulo to Dubai, from London to Moscow, from New York to Lagos, etc… And they are forming a network of global cities, or centres of command for global economy, as Saskia Sassen demonstrates. On the other hand, new forms of city formation, or urbanism, are being "invented", or generated, as a result of the global capital, people, idea and imagination. Global cities are increasingly becoming generic, as Rem Koolhaas and his followers say. But one should not forget, as Mike Davis reminds us, it's also a process of production of slums – more than 60% of urban populations are actually living in slums and "informal" cities. (ref. "Mike Davis, "Planet of Slums"). Basic rights to live such as sheltering, dwelling and even walking are now becoming a rarefied "luxury" for many in the city. However, as I have been studying in Chinese and other "non-Western" cities, conventional concepts and methods of urbanism have been surpassed by the waves of post-planning, namely construction before planning and hence turning planning to a posterior, "corrective" practice. In the process of "informal" expansion of urban spaces and construction without permission, normal, often lower class, inhabitants manage to turn themselves into ingenious and inventive urban and architectural designers to produce at once creative and pragmatic constructions, that imply huge potentials of solutions to serious urban problems from dwelling to work, from economic resource to environmental crisis, from social relations to urban texture, from individual rights to social institution, etc. They are often the most dynamic and alive zones of cities. The cases of Favelas in Latin American

cities and "Villages in the City" in China's current urbanisation, etc. have revealed clearly such a tendency. Many social workers, activists, architects, urbanists, sociologists, etc. have already invested their energies and talents to learn from the situation and come up with various solutions to improve the living conditions of those "informal" cities, and provide them a formal status – an ontological recognition of such an "alternative" way of city making and experiment with new urban organisation. They are no longer site of case study and laboratory of romantic ideas inspired by fractions of the urban life such as high density, flexibility and simplicity, etc.. They are now a vital part of the urban reality that one can no longer ignore or "solve" with tabula-rasa solutions. Certainly, this has been very much inspiring for many artists who are interested in urban transformation and social struggle. We have seen a rather great number of projects, works and actions created over the last decade, almost everywhere in the world. It's true that a part of these projects and works are what you described as "consuming a new topic". But, a considerable number of them are indeed truly engaging actions and succeeding in making themselves an integrate part of the urban transformation. Now doubt, in this process different actors are brought together to create not only a platform for resistance but also for prospecting for the future.

Coming back to our experience in the 10th Istanbul Biennial, one case can be found in Wong Hoy-Cheong's project dealing with the gentrification of the Sulukule area in Istanbul. His immerging with the local life via dialogues and collaboration with the Roman children and local community are deeply sincere, engaging and productive, in contrast with many superficial media exposures. Other artists in the biennial have been involved with many other cases around the world and proposed fantastic solutions to the problem. A conference on the issue, largely focusing on real cases such as urban problems in the confrontation process between Palestine and Isreal, the gentrification of AKM (Ataturk Cultural Centre), IMC (Istanbul Textile Market), etc., and, of course, the case of Sulukule, was organised as your project for the biennial on the last day… certainly, one should not forget the "Nightcomers" project that brought art works to different part of the Istanbul city, especially zones without accesses to "high culture". It's here that the biennial project obtained a real sense of public-ness while it tries to occupy different parts of the city and turn them into real public spaces…