Realities of the Artistic Imagination

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> And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech…
> And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.
> And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.
> Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.
> So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.[1]

This story from Genesis explains the differences among peoples and their languages as resulting from punishment for the arrogance and excess of the first people. However, this biblical passage could be interpreted as having above all a symbolic significance for human existence, in that it enables us to distinguish between four fundamental areas which decisively affect all of our lived relationships. Rather like mathematical spaces, human existence may be looked at in terms of dimensions: space (movement), society (politics, religion), language (communication), and history (time). Clearly these four areas, aspects of which often overlap or impinge on one another, are also highly relevant to contemporary art. For on the one hand, the attempt to categorize and define art according to themes or media has become increasingly irrelevant, while on the other, art is itself increasingly exploring the individual in all its various aspects. A comparison of works by contemporary artists from different generations and nationalities reveals not only the continuing relevance of these four existential dimensions but also a concomitant interest in developing appropriate forms of representation.

This is what Documenta11, with its many and varied artworks, sets out to investigate, in order to make the complexity and richness of the exhibition more accessible, the following essay will take as its key terms "space," "society," "language," and "history." These categories provide a semantic context for the individual artworks and also make it possible to explore each work within an interdisciplinary network of relationships. This will provide an overarching context for the various projects, above and beyond their installation within the exhibition.

SPACE

From an artistic point of view, there are two ways of exploring the phenomenon of space: by designing a new space or by reproducing an existing spatial situation. Both approaches enable the workings of a given space—through its boundaries and in its relationship to human beings—to become the subject of discussion.

"The social transformation of cities demands a radical renewal of the techniques of construction and urban planning; the growing population of the world demands an unheard-of pace of construction; the technical revolution (transportation, long-distance travel, production, etc.) leads to unforeseen demands."[2] This assessment was made by the Groupe d'Études d'Architecture Mobile (GEAM), founded in Paris in 1957 by the architect Yona Friedman (born Budapest, 1923). GEAM set out to develop

appropriate technological standards for the creation of mobile cities, dwellings, and furniture. Since then there has been, and continues to be, a considerable "social transformation of cities," and the demand for new urban models seems more urgent than ever before. Energy crises, environmental changes, the collapse of the Soviet system, and not least the increasingly rapid expansion of large cities have decisively changed the structures of society, and nowhere are the consequences of this so keenly felt as in architecture and topography.

In this context, "globalization" became the buzzword of the 1990s, referring in equal measure to the power of the new technology to relay information around the world, the increasing power of the multinationals as a result of corporate mergers, and the shifting patterns of migration caused by far-reaching political changes. In *S M L XL*, a book he published in 1995 in collaboration with Bruce Mau, Rem Koolhaas dedicated an entire chapter to this topical theme. Against the background of increasing globalization, architecture looks like an open process:

> Globalization destabilizes and redefines both the way architecture is produced and that which architecture produces. Architecture is no longer a patient transaction between known quantities that share cultures, no longer the manipulation of established possibilities, no longer a possible judgement in rational terms of investment and return, no longer something experienced in person—by the public or critics. Globalization lends virtuality to real buildings, keeps them indigestible, forever fresh.[3]

Since the late 1950s, both Friedman and Constant (Constant Anton Nieuwenhuijs, born Amsterdam 1920) have developed visionary architectural forms in an attempt to provide an answer to population growth and increased mobility. Both of them open up new habitable space by designing buildings on pillars, so that they seem to float above the surface of the earth, and both offer only a basic architectural structure that can then be adapted locally to the particular needs of the inhabitants. Friedman's "architecture mobile" has a social focus and makes practicability a priority: simple materials, low construction costs, basic utilities, and climate control provide the essentials for independent living in any large city in any part of the world. By contrast, Constant's design for a *New Babylon* is, ultimately, a purely fictional social utopia, in which a *homo ludens*, freed from the need to work, roams at leisure throughout the various interconnected "sectors" of the world, able as it were to intervene artistically to adjust both light and temperature. In both projects, the flow of human motion plays an important role, with increased mobility allowing for an improved exchange of goods and information and thus being seen as a necessity and as a form of progress.

A contrast to these visionary architectural schemes is provided by analyses of existing uses of urban space. The Rags Media Collective (founded New Delhi, 1991) explores its native city of New Delhi as a reflection of social, political, and juridical factors. Just as the site of the city is defined by its geographical coordinates, so its urban life can be described in terms of emotions, announcements, and regulations. Directives and decrees, along with the spatial and social behavior of residents which they influence, become a part of the city's identity. A comparison of the "coordinates of everyday life" of New Delhi with those of other cities makes it possible to view the respective living conditions with complete objectivity.

Fareed Armaly (born Iowa City, 1957) describes his project *From/To*, on the topical theme of Palestine, as a form of cartography. His installation simultaneously raises anthropological, geographical, and historical questions, and brings together elements from cinema, photography, video, and text. Space here is understood not geographically but as a product of political, social, and cultural factors.

Finally, space can also be represented by the two-dimensional medium of photography, but with a concentration on detail and particular perspectives and thus, despite the objectivity of photographic reproduction, at the level of illustration or example. The exhibition therefore concentrates on photographic works conceived as series and, to some extent, as experiments. The carefully composed photographs of the Indian journalist Ravi Agarwal (born New Delhi, 1958), which show people's everyday (work) lives under global capitalism, are at once studies of a nation and a piece of social criticism. The same can be said of the series of over two hundred miniature photographs by Michael Ashkin (born Morristown, N.J., 1955), which consists of landscape panoramas of the industrial wasteland of the Meadowlands in New Jersey. David Goldblatt (born Randfontein, South Africa, 1930) is represented by his narrative photographs of Boksburg, which depict the middle-class, small-town life of the white community there, and by a photo essay from Johannesburg. Here again, these series form the coordinates of a space in which specific social and historical conditions become visible. The depiction of space becomes a way of raising questions about political states of affairs.

Alongside these images and analyses of space, and the photographic documentation of "political" spaces, the exhibition also contains built spaces that can be entered and which address questions of reality and presence. For example, Mark Manders (born Volkel, Netherlands, 1968) has developed a surreal enclosed space whose furnishings are all slightly out of proportion. By contrast, *Park—A Plan for Escape*, by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster (born Strasbourg, 1965), in the Karlsaue in Kassel, is a visionary response to the existing park, produced entirely by adding extraneous props and decorative elements.

The Simparch group (founded Las Cruces, New Mexico, 1996) has designed a sculpture in the form of a space that can be used as a skateboard park. This produces a sound that is then amplified by the sculpture's concave form and by the wood of which it is made, giving the whole structure an additional impact. A second work by Simparch, in which sound is produced within a barrel-shaped architectural form, also turns a spatial sculpture into a sounding body whose sound can only be experienced as the beholder moves within it.

SOCIETY

Every human society is affected by its political and governmental structure and by its economic system. Critical reflection on the fundamental socio-structural influence of economic competition on urban, political, and economic spaces, especially as that competition intensifies as a result of globalization, has become a common theme in contemporary art. "The assertion is that this produces a socio-political system that... characterizes a type of capitalist domination that is completely new to its history. Of particular significance are the tendencies to create a new form of totalitarianism, namely, one based on ‚civil society.'"[4] In the wake of the economic and political paradigm shift from the social market economy to neoliberalism, the structures of the public domain have been thoroughly transformed. Gilles Deleuze refers to this transformation as a transition from a society of discipline to a society of control. Public spaces in the city are increasingly privatized and consequently accessible only for a "qualified" public. The resulting social climate is clearly articulated in the intensification of a discourse on security that visibly excludes from developments in which large sums of money have been invested those social groups who, through lack either of spending power or of enthusiasm, are insignificant as consumers.[5] This radical change, with all its wide-ranging effects on society, is sometimes reflected only very indirectly: in forms of work, in our view of the market, of the value of goods, and of corporate culture, and in a new understanding of democracy.

The way in which public space is increasingly privatized and dominated by the market and by images of consumption, and the effects of the omnipresence of competition are described by Andreas Siekmann (born Hamm, Germany, 1961) in his installation of drawings, which are meant to be read like a comic book or storyboard. The title, Aus: *Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung* (From: Limited Liability Company), is a pun on the German name for a form of joint-stock company and the limited sense of social responsibility common today.

Maria Eichhorn (born Bamberg, Germany, 1962) also analyzes the structure of the jointstock company in her project. She forms a public limited company, but she subverts the goal of maximizing profits by forbidding capital growth in her company. Applied to the countries nf Western capitalism, this altered goal would imply not a universal accumulation of capital and value but rather the political vision of a subsistence economy. But Eichhorn is also by implication raising questions about the definition and value of her own discipline, namely, art.

Meschac Gaba (born Cotonou, Benin, 1961) and Cildo Meireles (born Rio de Janeiro, 1948) take the market, consumption, and the value of commodities as their themes, by offering unusual goods for sale. Gaba's *Museum Shop*, a facility that actually forms part of the exhibition, sells products by other artists. Meireles offers popsicles, though the ice consists only of water. Meireles thus "elevates" a commodity that is often free to the status of a commodity with economic value, a precious basic necessity of life to a consumer luxury, and one that quickly disappears in the heat of summer. This ephemeral quality is underlined by the messages on the sticks, "Disappearing Element" and "Disappeared Element".

The film *Südostpassage* (Southeast Passage) by Ulrike Ottinger (born Konstanz, Germany, 1942) is also concerned with the changes in social and living conditions that follow from radical political and economic developments. She describes the "poverty [and] hopelessness, and the population's fear in the face of terror from the state or from gangs, of Mafia-like business practices and paramilitary despotism" in the shellshocked countries of the world, which have fallen deeper and deeper into economic chaos since the restructuring of their industrial and agricultural economies.

Incompatibility even between societies within Europe is shown clearly in *Shoes for Europe* by Pavel Braila (born 1971 in Chisinau, Moldavia). For example, before international trains can cross the border from Moldavia to Romania the wheels need to be changed to a different gauge. The trains themselves have to undergo a form of metamorphosis before they can travel into another country.

LANGUAGE

In contemporary art, the image is now often accompanied or even replaced by some form of linguistic expression. This may be purely optical, like the image itself, or, by contrast, take an acoustic form. This represents a complete transformation of the way in which we experience the work, and in the latter case a change in the actual materiality of the object itself.

The possibility of experiencing moods or meanings through the actual shape of letters endows the sign, otherwise so matter-of-fact, with inherent visual value and at the same time makes it a means of individual expression. Here the written word communicates not only through the decoding of semantic units but also through its physical appearance. The translation of a written sign into a spoken language in essence amounts to no more than a transformation into another medium. Here writing's original two-dimensional form of reality is also transformed into another medium, into an invisible sculpture, by means of sound.

The project *One Million Years* by On Kawara (born Kariya, Japan, 1933) is based on written series of years that are given a spatial dimension by being read aloud. Not only does the sound of voices fill a real room but, since what is said is realized in thought, it is as though two temporal axes were created that stand for virtual temporal spaces—one leading backward into the past, and the other forward into the future. In contrast to his paintings of dates on canvas, in this project the artist emphasizes the particular significance of the spoken, and hence ephemeral, word. The sensory experience of the sounds becomes the appropriate articulation of the transient nature of time.

Hanne Darboven (born Munich, 1941) also works with systems of signs that are experienced acoustically. Her "writing-pictures" of (experienced) history and passages of time are systems of notation that make use not only of data encoded as numbers but also of written texts, diagrams, and photographs. By transcribing the numbers into systems of musical notes, the signs can also be experienced as music. The strict rhythm that is already perceptible in the visual form is brought to a final climax in the complex interplay of sounds.

Ecke Bonk (born Hoechst, Germany, 1953) is interested in systems of signs as an interdisciplinary expression of art, science, typography, and philosophy, in order to reflect on the conditions and context of cultural achievements. He calls himself a "typosopher," and is concerned with the typical representation of these systems. In his work based on the German Dictionary begun by the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, considered the standard work in the history and etymology of the German language, Bonk deals with the written word and its many layers of meaning. In the installation, all 360,000 entries in this etymological dictionary are projected in a random sequence generated by a computer program. The computer-controlled system allows a new, unpredictable insight into this influential and almost unimaginable system of words, which serves as an example of one central model for the perception of reality.

The evolution from printing to computer-generated texts and the use of new display technologies that facilitate new forms of human interaction are among the themes that appear in the work of David Small (born Manchester, Conn., 1965). His *The Illuminated Manuscript* consists of a data projector that covers the pages of an over-lifesize book with an interactive text. Every page of the book has a built-in chip, which reports back to the computer when the previous page is turned, and then a reactive text is projected.

Ben Kinmont (born Burlington, Vt., 1963) examines the possibilities of the mobility of texts. He had conversations with some of the residents of Kassel and asked them what the most the important aspect of their lives was and whether this should be considered art; the responses are printed and distributed during the exhibition. The title *Moveable Type No Documenta* alludes to the paths of texts, to the moveable types used by Johannes Gutenberg, to the development of the printing technology that now allows almost everyone to produce their own publications, and last but not least to the genre of publication as a form of exhibition, which was developed during the 1960s.

In his paintings using coal dust, Glenn Ligon (born New York, 1960) quotes sentences from the essay "Stranger in the Village" by James Baldwin. By choosing this text, the artist is raising the issue of the discrimination and lack of freedom experienced by black citizens in society, of which Baldwin himself had first-hand knowledge. The texture of the monochrome makes the text difficult to read, and this both materializes and dematerializes the text as a bearer of meaning. The series of paintings is turned into a panorama that fills a room, one which the viewer can never perceive in its entirety.

The project of Jens Haaning (born Hørsholm, Denmark, 1965) is also about understanding language. A loudspeaker attached to a streetlamp plays recordings of jokes in Turkish. Only when standing directly under the streetlamp is the voice audible, and only someone who understands Turkish will "get" the jokes. Yet the project is aimed precisely at those who don't speak Turkish, who are disconcerted by hearing something in public that they cannot understand. The artist chose to use jokes for their simple narrative style, and for their light-hearted associations.

HISTORY

Although archives are generally associated with the writing of history, which is largely dependent on them for its knowledge, the theme of the archive also comes up frequently in art, which in some cases even develops its own special archives. The different approaches of the writer and the artist naturally produce very different forms of historical truth. Often in art the starting point is the artist's own biography, with the result that collective history is seen very differently from how it appears in historical writing, which tends to have a more universalizing orientation.

Thus, for example, the sculptor Ivan Kožaric (born Petrinja, Croatia, 1921) exhibits his own studio as a work in progress which changes every day. It is not a finished sculpture that he wants us to look at, but rather the process by which the work comes into being, the constant creativity in the productive act. Dieter Roth (born Hanover, 1930, died Basel, 1998) follows a similar approach in his work *Tischruine* (Table Ruins), a work developed over a period of some thirty years that has a dual existence as an artist's studio and an art object.

Jef Geys (born Leopoldsburg, Belgium, 1934) presents all the photographs he has taken of his daily life over the last forty years in the thirty-six-hour film, Dag en nacht en dag en ... (Day and Night and Day and ...). The photographic sequence unfolds slowly, as though the viewer's own life were passing before him/her as a series of remembered images. The photographs show the artist in his everyday environment, and capture the monotonous repetition of the same sights and situations over a period of years. In his film *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty*, which lasts almost five hours, Jonas Mekas (born Seminiskiai, Lithuania, 1922) has put together film sequences that present his life in diary fashion. In contrast to Geys's photography, the images here capture movement. The viewer is a witness to happy moments in the past, which create a mood of melancholy because of their unrepeatability.

Georges Adéagbo (born Cotonou, Benin, 1942) makes a connection between the history of his native country, Benin, and the site of the exhibition. He collected various kinds of archive material in Kassel, including books and records, and combined them with found objects or paintings and sculptures from his homeland. The objects are carefully displayed along the wall and on the floor of the room, as a kind of carpet of images, which defines them as objects for viewing pure and simple and creates a historical distance from which they can be seen. Adéagbo's installations have a political subject, and usually deal with the colonial perceptions of his homeland.

Carlos Garaicoa (born Havana, Cuba, 1967) is interested in the question of how far fictional elements can play a role in the reconstruction of history. As part of this interest he looks at unfinished socialist architectural projects, using Havana as an example, with these abandoned schemes symbolizing a failed political and social program. Garaicoa then uses drawings and models to bring the buildings to completion, allowing them to exist in his imagination. His architectural work begins where reality ends and is replaced by the imagination.

The photographic series taken by Bernd and Hilla Becher (born Siegen, Germany, 1931, and Potsdam, Germany, 1934) have a completely historical and documentary objectivity. For more than forty years the two photographers have been systematically recording the industrial structures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, combining them in tableaux of comparative typologies. These typologies imply a morphological inventory that could, theoretically, be continued infinitely. Although the Bechers give their works very precise titles, and they document the exact place and year of each photograph, the way in which the photographs are grouped shows how similar the underlying forms of each architectural type are, despite their individual characteristics. The series "Fachwerkhäuser des Siegener Industriegebiets" (Half-timbered Houses in the Industrial Area of Siegen) is one of the Bechers' earliest projects and epitomizes the pictorial grammar of their work.

In the work of Stan Douglas (born Vancouver, Canada, 1960), film sequences made at the Herkules monument in Kassel are transmitted into the exhibition in real time. Here the film sequences are merged with a film made earlier, in which actors perform scenes from the Grimms' fairy tales. Douglas is clearly contrasting real, genuine images with fictitious elements from the past. Both sequences deal with the history of Kassel: one in an indirect way in a dramatic scene, the other in a purely contemplative way from the standpoint of a monument. The viewer experiences two different ways of confronting history.

Although the paintings of Luc Tuymans (born Mortsel, Belgium, 1958) are private in character, they nevertheless refer thematically to real historical events that are part of our collective memory today. These include the tyranny of Nazism, Flanders during the time of collaboration, and Belgian colonial policies. Tuymans is able to interrogate a historical fact through an artwork to the point where the aesthetic character of the representation allows us to see its ethical problematic.

The artistic projects discussed here are representative of the works shown in the exhibition. The structuring of the artworks into the four categories of space, society, language, and history illustrates how the artists are exploring similar existential themes and taking critical positions, but also shows that they do so from widely different perspectives and with widely varying expressive strategies. Against this background, the artists must be seen as potential correctives to society, whose works are able to confront factual reality with alternative realities; or, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, "the very definition of the real is *that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction.*"[6]

Translated from the German by Steven Lindberg.

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1 Genesis 11:1 and 11:4-8 (Authorized King James Version).

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3 Rem Koolhaas, "Globalization" (1993), in Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Rem Koolhaas, and Bruce Mau, S M L XL (Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large), New York: Monacelli, 1995, p. 367.

4 Joachim Hirsch, Der nationale Wettbewerbsstaat: Staat, Demokratie und Politik im globalen Kapitalismus, Berlin and Amsterdam: Edition ID-Archiv, 1995, p. 9.

5 On this, see Klaus Ronneberger, "Zero Tolerance: Urbane Kontrollstrategien in den neunziger Jahren," Öffentlicher Raum Salzburg-Lehen: Fin Projekt von Galerie Fotohof, Galerie 5020, Initiative Architektur, Internationale Sommerakademie fCir Bildende Kunst, Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg: Pustet, 1998, pp. 15-22.

6 Jean Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange and Death, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1993, p. 73; originally published as L'échange symbolique et la mod, Paris: Gallimard, 1976.