

INVISIBILITY AS THE NEW PUBLICNESS

Considerations towards a responsible practice

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My aim in the following pages will be to understand how figures such as architects, designers or artists can generate content autonomously of the system of creative production and display they are currently part of. Rather than concentrating on remuneration material stability, we must, above all, find ways of resisting the de-socializing forces of the system. This requires re-aligning of our value systems to fit our true needs and creating occasions for informal exchange. Only by strengthening the bonds between us and by developing entirely new ways of understanding our professions can we engage in a socially aware and responsible practice. These thoughts, though directed to all design practitioners, have as their pre-condition the willingness to place social value above monetary gains, thus their relevance will vary according to personal economic conditions, cultural and political belonging and professional goals.

To explore my question in depth, defining the nature of the existing system of production and display is essential. It should be understood as being dependent on and largely shaped by what Mark Fisher refers to as „post-fordist capitalism“: a “pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.”(1) In this context, architects, designers and artists are reduced to the position of producers of value in a fictional and distorted knowledge economy. This condition is at once violently imposed and intimately internalized by these figures. It is not only shaped and dictated at different levels of governance, but also reinforced by mutual and individual expectations, by cultural, economic and institutional factors. It is clear that the behavior and output the system demands no longer correspond to our effective desires and conditions. Creative practitioners still strive for an idea of stability that belongs to a post-war imaginary. This idea includes, for instance, a secure job and income, a stable place to call home, a clear division between work and leisure. I ask whether these aspirations are really worth pursuing. Would maintaining this trajectory not always result in failure? Or should we aim to re-define what stability could mean in the near future? How can we overcome such a system whilst our lives and professional frameworks remain so dependent on it?

In the world of mainstream creative production and display, concepts such as efficiency, visibility, marketability and consensus have become the benchmarks for personal and professional success. Public institutions, “independent” practitioners and design teams have all internalised a profit-driven mind-set, both in their vocabulary and their actions; meetings between creative professionals, such as symposia, panels and discussions, often revolve around speakers trying to cement their own positions, emphasizing the exceptionality of their knowledge, and thereby reinforcing disciplinary boundaries and hierarchies. They act as competitors in a push for what increasingly looks like market differentiation. It seems that a growing professional fixation on short-term events has undermined the value of long- term thinking. The activities of “engaged” designers are described with terms such as

co-creation or commoning, which become buzzwords open to misuse as marketing slogans by parasitic entities geared to value extraction. These words then become empty decals, echoing nothing more than the neutral interest and false proximity of virtual communalities. Our endeavours become pure images and symptoms.

Against this background, for creative practitioners and researchers to be truly engaged in critical or social terms is nearly impossible: they seem only able of representing social engagement. The representation of a political act, with all the constraints of a "project", takes priority over the political end itself. Stella Rollig explains this further: "political and societal practice of artists (or architects) is always claimed as art or architecture, when the social effectiveness is not the true priority anymore, because ultimately only the affirming of the (art/architecture) system seems to allow individual careers."(2)

I

To further explore how one might develop autonomous forms of practice, I must consider my own experience as a "non-belonger", operating on the fringes of the design professions. "Non-belonger" means that I have successfully avoided a career in a specific field thus far. Every time I found my actions to be too strictly informed by a frame, the requirements of a discipline or institution, my instinct has been to desert. This is not due to a volatile nature, rather it is a reaction to a feeling of powerlessness in the face of arbitrary hierarchies and incomprehension for what I consider to be my most valuable skills.

In all my activities, no matter the specific field – be it as an art historian, journalist, as an editor of books or as a co-director of Depot Basel, a place for contemporary design, together with Matylda Krzykowski – , my role has ultimately been the same: that of a catalyst. I have taken on this role because of my innate aim to connect people, let them share words and thoughts and help them act together in a purposeful way.

This is my most important skill, and it has nothing to do with my training. Everything I learned, whether at university or afterwards, only provided me with the tools and opportunities to apply my skill, and a frame for it to coalesce into a public sphere.

As a result of my "non-belonger" status, I lack a noteworthy title. Often I am not academic enough for the academics, and too academic for the makers. This makes it hard to place me on a disciplinary or hierarchical grid and might lead the representatives of an institution or a discipline to not take me seriously. This lack of recognition can be frustrating. What I consider my most precious skill this ability to act as a catalyst – is only valid if applied on an interpersonal level, and becomes worthless when confronted with the rigid, business-oriented frameworks of the dominant system. There is no space to express this tendency, and perhaps this is a good thing.

Yet despite these frustrations, my lack of belonging has also meant a sort of freedom. Most of the time, my work remains invisible to a system that relies on the constant reproduction and manifestation of hierarchies, dominance, discipline, and success. This invisibility protects the integrity of my skills and ideas: I don't feel forced to follow a disciplinary curriculum or a specific etiquette. Because no one cares, I can follow my own path, find a direction within myself, independently of time frames, disciplines, and trends. My ability to connect others is a solid foundation for all my actions, wherever they may find expression. Because of this, Depot Basel offers me a unique situation. It is a place where I can negotiate between the invisibility required for in-depth thinking and the possibility of making segments visible. This means cooperating with museums or public institutions whilst at the same time having a very tangible "invisible sphere." Depot Basel also becomes a device for continuous self-monitoring, a constant reality check for ideas. I do not, however, feel the stress induced by the frame of a project or by an exhibition, I know that all I can contribute is an insight from my own ongoing productive process, a snapshot of my motivations, mirrored by and merged with the motivations and personalities of my relative collaborators, a moment of temporary truth, condensed in one very specific environment and time.

II

Where from, then, should our recognition derive, if it is not by gaining prestigious job positions or curatorial appointments? I suggest we find recognition as individuals, not as art historians, journalists or curators. I suggest we no longer let ourselves be driven by the desire for an institutional career or a higher position on a hierarchical ladder; Though in my professional life these occasions of "official" recognition have not failed to come, they only caused ephemeral moments pride or excitement. Truly satisfactory recognition I have found in small bits of conversation made for the conversation's sake, which might unfold in any environment (whether professional or not). Occasions, where the exchange in between people, who often barely know each other, but still are connected through shared interests, mutual convictions and goals, through inter-subjective personal closeness and sympathy, through an empathic way of seeing the world. I find my recognition in these moments of unobstructed empathy; or instance in between, before, after different kinds of professional gatherings; when people with common interests and professional motivations share less careful, more politically charged opinions. The ties created in these "off-the-radar" encounters, prove to be stronger and deeper than those made as career choices or as a result of a project's requirements, the program of a political movement or even by family. Why? Because the connections I refer to, are based on the metrics of un-corruptible foundations such as empathy, solidarity, mutual understanding and friendship. I don't believe everyone is the same. I do however believe in something that goes beyond all cultural or class-informed boundaries. The ability to be empathic. Svetlana Boym pointed out that "friendship is an elective affinity without finality, a relationship without plot or place in our society, an experience for its own sake. Friendship is not always democratic or egalitarian, but rather selective and not entirely inclusive."⁽³⁾ This is what Hannah Arendt recalls about her friendship with the writer Mary McCarthy: "It's not that we think so much alike, but that we do this thinking-business for and with each other."⁽⁴⁾

In a so-called private environment, those friendly encounters or basic affiliations are often self-evident, even taken for granted. In a professional environment they can be personally and professionally liberating, psychically enriching and pleasurable. Still the value of those encounters, which to me are the essence of everything I do, the motor and the core of my professional and private being and bonds, remain unacknowledged. Even by ourselves. We see them as mere by-products of our paid activity. Regardless of how much our actions ultimately are influenced by those encounters, regardless how many benefits we derive from them, our measure of success and value for our work remains the prevalent one. The value generated by the social sphere remains untapped. When engaging in socially aware forms of design, this disconnection becomes even more evident: to bring about social awareness while remaining within the professional frames which negate those social values is paradoxical.

Why do we continue to fit our personal aim to act responsibly, our intimate motivations, into forms of public display which are so vulnerable to commodification? Why do we still cling to concepts of representation and reception basically coined during the Enlightenment? We allow our work to be perceived as definite, rather than acknowledging and expressing its evolving, provisional nature – one attributed, for instance to natural scientific research since the 19th century. We consider ourselves citizens, but citizenship entails responsibility and entitlement towards what is collective. Nowadays – as the africanist Clapperton C. Mavhunga has pointed out at a panel at HKW5 – citizenship also involves a large portion of creativity. But in the virtual and physical stages of contemporary public discourse – museums, squares, social media platforms – where consumption and surveillance rule, the idea of a public dimension, open to everyone's creative contribution is impossible. Why do we have such a strong need for recognition from a capitalist reward system or an evanescent audience? Sure, we need recognition. But as we have seen, that is something we can find elsewhere. We also need money to survive. Should our goal then be to alter the perceptions of the ones who pay us, leading them to recognize our favored activities as work? I don't think so. "Work existed before and will further exist after capital. capital is only a fruit of work, and would not even exist without work. Work is superior to capital and requires much more attention." These words are not from Marx's *Capital*, but were uttered six years before its publication, in 1861, by Abraham Lincoln in his "State of the Union Address." (6) What I find worth of notice is that money is seen a fruit of our work, one amongst many, I would say. So why not - instead of trying to shift the perception of others about our work – shift our own aims away from monetary gain and towards other, complementary results of our work?

For a truly socially engaged design practice, we must re-consider and re-negotiate our motivations. Looking to ourselves as well as to others. Not once but constantly. Why don't we acknowledge and coin a different value system to define our work, which has become so indistinguishable from our lives? Certainly, we need regulations, but even these should be defined by us, made to suit our aims and ways of acting, not the ones we accept to avoid the inconvenience of questioning and challenging them. We must unhinge from the prevalent evaluation criteria, recalibrate our orientation. We must discard appearances, budgets, time frames, numbers, disciplines, marketability, seemingly objective despair and pessimism; we must fundamentally question things such as international borders, languages and so on – and shift our metrics. In order to make our innate affiliations the base of our

bonds and actions. Subjectivity, shared hope, empathy and friendship should become the base and give the directions of our behavior and ethics. The grid we use to determine value, directions and orientation is necessarily an issue of ongoing conflict, contradiction and thus negotiation. It is a partially fluid product: its appearance will depend on what we do, where and for whom it is developed. We constantly negotiate on a grid of prospects, in-betweens, voids and blanks to be filled. Our reward system should be an economy of sharing of acts and thoughts. Our bonding should be intuitively rhizomatic, in the sense of Deleuze's and Guattari's schizo-nomadic existence⁷: it can escape the social constraints of a fixed identity. Combining an arbitrary point with other arbitrary points, it can connect very heterogeneous elements. In these compounds, there are no subjects or objects. The rhizome is not a unit, rather it is made up of moving directions. It has neither beginning nor end, however, it has a center from which it spreads. Thus, a rhizome can be broken or torn at any point and still continue on other lines further. It is this multiform and shifting nature our relations should strive to imitate, if we wish to transcend the deep contradictions in our practice.

IV

During SAMIZDATA, a conference that took place in Berlin this year on resistance in the digital age (8), some speakers pointed to the issue with seeing whistleblowing as a heroic act. They suggested that blowing the whistle should become a normal thing to do, a shared responsibility, becoming a kind of epistemic disobedience. This holds a lesson for all of us. What is really so special about being an architect or a curator? Their respective skills are just tools. No different from the skills of a cook or a gardener. Why then do we still parade our professional titles as if they were signs of distinction? Instead I suggest architecture freed of its aim of becoming immortal through continuous self-manifestations, without authorship, without spectators, and above all, without architects. In such conditions, architecture as a practice would lose its ontological meaning. It will cease to be visible. The according acts would still take place: with our skills, knowledge and professional tools, we act as equal instruments with others, we share, act, discuss and experiment. Bereft of a prevalent frame, we ground our activities on the only form of authenticity that eluded public surveillance, and offers us the possibility of being citizens among others. Friendship, empathy, compassion, here we will find the addressees for our action, our partners in crime, our co-thinkers and co-actors. The prevalent narrative of this sphere is not the ones of victims, bereft of will and power, but the one of agitators, who have appropriated and internalized the same instinctive narrative.

If we look for a public sphere, an audience of equal citizens, we need not search in places where people gather, where one's engagement with migrants can be posted on social media or where it counts how many virtual friends one has. We don't have to look for a public dimension in the spaces where all action is ultimately fuelled by market profiling. These spaces are the primary target of surveillance. Here individuals might even acknowledge surveillance, but bereft of the ability of imagining alternatives, just accept the "lesser evil," by internalizing the narrative of fear offered by the system. The collectivity and "togetherness," which we have to look for and to value, is not that of a

“we-all”, but that of an every-one-of-us. Here I refer to Kai van Eikels, who speaks of the importance of acting and thinking in a collective paradigm, made of constellations that exist and evolve without having to manifest their existence through forming a party, a group or a movement; he also points out that most of these constellations exist without the individuals even knowing that they are a part of a collective body. These writings describe forms of collectivity, whose dynamics are based on the separation between the respective individuals. In these collective forms, the gap between separated individual action is described as a blank space, through which individual acts can synchronize and support each other in their realization and effects (9) As an illustrating example, van Eikels uses the image of an orchestra: where the worth of the rhythmic entrainment is not to be found in an additive accumulation of the sounds, but where temporal containment and limited phases of accumulation open up a collective-individual and distributed awareness. In this near-synchronization, each one of us can hear better, and the orchestra becomes more permeable for the world it is part of (10).

The surveillance activists at the conference shared another thought worth noting: that Julien Assanges' constant self-monitoring, his attempts to beat the surveillance system unleashed upon him with his own weapons, is not working. The contradictions of the system cannot be accelerated as these contradictions will always be resolved internally by the shape-shifting qualities of the system itself. This idea may be familiar from Deleuze and Guattari's desiring-machines(11): the market, the media and politics know how to use the desiring-productions; in its delimitation, psychiatry treats them as illness. The machines splutter, overheat, break down, and, again and again, break up into new structures of a schizophrenic, capitalist society, without ever having realized themselves.

Disobedience in our times has nothing to do with talking loudly, nor with striving for the most visibility, nor with building big houses for the powerful. An uncompromising opposition to the system is also unlikely to lead towards independence and liberation, because protest is always made from a weaker position. Protest ultimately means to act as a supplicant, to state a claim to a system, which in turn will meet these requirements or not. Neither can I support defection from the system, which can only result in a detached, ignorant and illusory "bubble." We cannot dissociate ourselves from the system, as we still need it as much as it needs us. It supports us, enables us, keeps us alive. But we have to stop placing our "hopes for salvation" in it; we have to emancipate ourselves from the constant physical and psychical pressure it exerts.

V

This emancipation can come only by deliberately, albeit temporarily, occupying Third Spaces. These should be understood as part of a concept of three kinds of physical and mental spaces, in which the third is a hybrid, combining and separating the positions inside and outside the system. It acts both as disturber and as a mediator.

To allow such Third Spaces to manifest, I suggest acting in a conscious and concrete, dialectic and schizophrenic deleuzian way; by drawing distinctions between our vocations and jobs, between audience and collaborators (or partners in crime). Deleuze's Schizophrenic and his Little Girl are united in our bodies: The Little Girl explores a world of "surfaces:" the shifting realm of social appearances and nonsense words which nevertheless seem to function. The Schizophrenic, who sets off on his own in order to liberate his desiring-machines, is by contrast an explorer of "depths," one who rejects the surface entirely and returns instead to the body. According to Deleuze every actual body has a limited set of traits, habits, movements, affects, etc. But it also has a virtual dimension: a vast reservoir of potential traits, habits, movements, affects, connections, etc. (12). So why not constantly reconsider the own actions and motivations in order to draw out and activate these virtual potentials?

As explorers of the deleuzian depths – which I here see as the equivalent of the notion of Third Space, or the invisible sphere – we will find a real and tangible space for recovery and respiration from the frame's pressure. But it will become also a place for pre-consideration, re-thinking, re-disputing themes in an in-depth way which the prevalent system of creative production cannot foster. The invisible sphere of this notion of Third Space also opens the field for experimentation, for the development of a new consciousness. We will find our addressees, in the in-between, in the before and the after. As explorers of the depths we can act as tools among others, sharing our skills with our addressees and co-creators, co-thinkers, and co-activists; re-define and re-discover the public dimension, enable structures and bases, on which that kind of encounter can happen. This activity of explorers of the depth should be understood and practiced as an intermittent communication process, continued over years led by its very own stellar system.

As Little Girls, we have to carefully choose which part of our schizophrenic endeavors we show to our public, which part we let coalesce within prevalent public spheres, when and how we do so. This will ultimately also be the part of our endeavors we earn our money with. Whether by building, talking or writing, our activity as Little Girls could be seen as one of revealing intermediate insights into our invisible endeavors, offering "emporary truths", which only make sense in a very specific time, environment, and in front of a specific public. We should avoid expressing ourselves through axioms, inventories and similar, which aspire to being absolute, all-embracing, universal and impartial. Building structures, presenting researches or writing texts, will be performed as an act of agency, inspired, fuelled and directed by our invisible endeavors. This will fill the system's outdated framework, whether physical or conceptual, with new content, break open encrusted structures and terminologies and re-purpose them, transform what is commonly perceived as negative into strength, slowly rearrange value systems, which may be less cemented than it seems.

What might these Third Spaces look like? Where and how can even imperfect approximations begin to emerge? And what would acting as a "schizophrenic architect" actually imply? This summer, along with a group of friends with a common professional background, I retreated for a week to a temporary construction, built by Constructlab collective on the ancient city wall of Mons, in Belgium. This example illustrates what I mean by a real Third Space, which offers a liberated, stress-free atmosphere for professional-amicable encounter. During that week, the boundaries between holiday and work, labor

and leisure, friendship and collegiality softened, blurred, even disappeared. The participants discussed, presented and acted without the restrictions of a project frame, while trying to harness the value of this social encounter. Drawing from their own interests and research fields, each of the nine participants initiated a collaborative experiment, loosely connected to the topical frame of the week evolving around the notions of "diffuse" and „resonance“. In this "experiment," the participants were asked to mirror their singularity and the group's collectivity in the terrain, define spatial requirements for "working and thinking as friends," and to find out on what terms – if at all – the fact of being friends and working together within a physically and mentally circumscribed terrain, leads to a sense of inter-subjectivity. Following a questionnaire, the participants set off on an experimental journey through the area, detecting the parallels between the internal and external landscapes to uncover physical equivalents to the structures, dynamics and peculiarities of the group's constellation.

Being part of the other participants experiments was a revelatory experience: the ideas that were elaborated, the ease with which the group confronted the demanding program, the mutual understanding developed all reinforced my fundamental thesis: The participants acknowledge the lack of occasions for this kind of friendly yet professional liberated exchange in their lives.

The location of the Third Space begins to be understood not so much in terms of its existing spatial conditions, as by parameters essential to the functioning of the constellation's action such as privacy, communality, voids and blind spots. Worth noting was the consensus among the participants that their actions would remain to a certain extent invisible to the outside, I see this as crucial for the development of these Third Spaces.

Constructlab, the initiators of the project in Mons, seemed to embody just what being "invisible architects" might entail. First of all they did not make the construction site one for showing off technical prowess. rather it becomes an opportunity for communication, offering a context which can be enriched by the unexpected. The designers-builders bring the site to life through their permanent and unencumbering presence. They interacted not as architects, but as inhabitants of the structure and neighbours, carefully generating new dynamics between people and allowing them to integrate other participants. In Mons for example the area is now cared for by a very heterogeneous group of citizens, amongst which, the pétanque-club and a baker's group. In their various encounters with the city council, Constructlab was there to support them – in this case in their function as architects.

VII

Though in the prevalent frame of creative production and display it is impossible to take on socio-political responsibility or engage in in-depth professional exchange, architects and designers need both desperately. We must deeply rethink our own professional and private motivations, our understanding of temporality, visibility, work, value and disciplinarity. This re-adjustment of values must occur before we will ever be able to act in a responsible way towards our societies. To learn how to truly engage in a participatory practice, we have to find, create and open up

third spaces. These should provide the invisibility and shelter we need to experiment outside of the timeframes and impositions on content required within the system. From there we can start to build professional structures, coin new values, and new "bonding systems." These are the foundations for a strategy of transformation towards a responsible way of acting.

Endnotes

1 Fisher, Marc. 2009. *Capitalist Realism. Is there no alternative?*, London: ZERO Books.

2 Rollig, Stella. 2000. "Zwischen Agitation und Animation. Aktivismus und Partizipation in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts". (<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0601/rollig/de>)

3 Boym, Svetlana. 2009. "Scenography of Friendship," in: *Cabinet Magazine* Issue 36, 2009/2010;. (<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/36/boym.php>)

4 Brightman, Carol (Ed.). 1995. *Between Friends, The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–1975*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace,

5 "Träumende Kollektive," discussion with Jennifer Gabrys, in the context of the project "100 Years of Now," HKW (Haus der Kulturen der Welt), Berlin, 30 September 2015

6 Lincoln, Abraham. 1861. "State of the Union Address." (<http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/lincoln/stateoftheunion1861.html>)

7 Deleuze, Gilles, Guattari, Felix. 1987. *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

8 "SAMIZDATA: Tactics and Strategies for Resistance," Kunstquartier Bethanien, Berlin, 11 - 12 September 2015; <http://www.disruptionlab.org/samizdata>

9 van Eikels, Kai. 2013. *Die Kunst des Kollektiven. Performance zwischen Theater, Politik und Sozio-Ökonomie*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink. 12

10 van Eikels, Kai. 2015. "Zwischen den Geräuschen, die Welt. Offbeat-Kollektivität." (<https://kunstdeskollektiven.wordpress.com/2015/05/31/zwischen-den-gerauschen-die-welt-offbeat-kollektivitat/>)

11 Deleuze, Gilles, Guattari, Felix. 1983. *Anti Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

12 Here one may also ask whether our actions in the Third Space can take on the form of a deleuzian "Minor Literature." Can we de-territorialize the major language of our professional knowledge and use it to map alternative territories of action? Following this deleuzian thread, this displacement of tools would make every subject a socius (a subjectivity linked to the political) and every one of his or hers

action performed in collectivity, a necessarily political one. (see e.g. Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari: *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, University of Minnesota Press 1986)