Modes of Spatial Exploration in Berlin:
Collaborating with Knut Eckstein on Subverting the City[1]

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Abstract

This article primarily investigates the city of Berlin on two levels: as a totalizing vision in which a specific perspective of urban space is imagined and built into the city and as a layered and disparate space in which urban objects are catalysts for associative narratives for rethinking the urban environment. It concentrates on two primary areas of Berlin: the Kulturforum and Bebelplatz. Looking to a creative experience of the city, the author collaborates with the artist Knut Eckstein to explore the idea of subversive space based on a performative transgression of barriers in architecture.

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 (Michel de Certeau, 1984: 56).

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 Walter Benjamin, 2006: 54).

Potential Labyrinths

Walter Benjamin wrote of a getting lost in the city – in Berlin at the start of the twentieth century – as an art in which one must be schooled. This essay turns to Berlin today in an attempt to get lost in familiar places. These are sites that have been planned as cultural centers in Berlin at different points in the city's history, but which have lost their focus through Berlin's spatial-temporal fragmentation. In one location, the area around the Kulturforum, the space is transitional in nature, it is comprised by the Berlin Philharmonic, various museums and cultural institutions and the State Library, 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. Still, in its initial conception, it was meant to be a cultural anchor of West Berlin. Drawing on plans by Hans Scharoun from 1946-57, it was to counter the regularity and denseness of the nineteenth century city with an irregular urban landscape (Enke et al., 1999). Since Reunification, the project has forfeited its place of status and no longer fits into an articulated urban ensemble. The other site, however, should stage a spatial-visual experience of Berlin, as will be later articulated. Bebelplatz runs along Unter den Linden, arguably Berlin's most famous street and the one that led to the Stadtschloß (Berlin City Palace), now under reconstruction. It is framed by the Staatsoper (State Opera) and was the site of the 1933 book burning and currently remains constricted by long-running renovations on the opera house.

As both spaces are highly visible, there is a strong tendency to contain them within conventions of seeing and to project

intended urban meanings onto them. While it would not be possible to physically get lost in either the Kulturforum area or Bebelplatz, I asked the artist Knut Eckstein to engage with me in a labyrinth of associations in exploring them in August 2014. 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 historical and historically charged space (Ladd, 1997). Much of the attraction of the original Potsdamer Platz was due the "unplanned liveliness" of the ensemble, which was then extinguished through the developments of National Socialism, the effects of World War II and the Cold War (Ladd, 1997: 121).

Brian Ladd (1997: 1) 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. 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 (2005) of experience as a creative act in which the object of experience may be both materially present and created by the subject. Experience lies in a gulf between subject and object in a potential space in which the line between self and other is blurred. 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 internalized and entering into new constellations. Christopher Bollas (1992) speaks of a dream-like relationship with objects where an in-

termediate space is entered into and in which the subject is inhabited by inner constellations of psychic realities, so that while objects are fantastically charged, the experience of the subject is simultaneously fueled by outer reality. Thinking of the city in terms of a potential or intermediate space allows for it to be opened up 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 (2006) 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 architecture through critical spatial practice, new interdisciplinary points of contact are established. In discussing walking as spatial practice, Rendell (2006: 188) suggests that, "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." Walking can thus be understood as a thought process in which relationships between objects both present, covered over, and absent are continually being activated and re-thought by the subject. While such narratives may be idiosyncratic in nature, Bollas refers to spatialization as "the unconscious development of space according to the evolution of any city" and defines "interspatial relations" as the "psychology of spaces as they relate to one another" (Bollas, 2009: 205-227; 216-217). Sites evoke dreamlike convergences of motifs that are juxtaposed with one other in the subject's movement through space. Free from normal sense-making constraints, unexpected arrangements may be created. Urban sites may prompt a reflection to another time, or to figures germane to them. In this sense, dreamlike engagement with the public sphere could call into focus issues of social relevance.

Referencing Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre and the phenomenon of the nineteenth century flâneur, Sophie Wolfrum (2008) underlines the performative and productive aspects of such spatializing arrangements. Space is the productive medium of lived social dynamics, and therefore contingent upon an interactive subject. That is, sites are not only idiosyncratically charged, but are situated in a social chain of associations. The Situationist International practiced engagement with the social psychological nature of space

as an investigative method (Wolfrum, 2008). In reflectively walking through the city, a critical art practice advanced by the Situationists, objects of the city may be rearranged to think their various configurations in terms of what normally remains invisible. As Wolfrum notes, the Situationist investigations of urban space did not – for the most part – result in artistic urban interventions. She, however, calls for an active engagement in the city through artistic-performative means to return space to the cultural memory of an urban society. In the following, Berlin will be considered in terms of its interspatiality, as sites as potential spaces activated in drifting through them. 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. Further, in collaboratively thinking about the city with Knut Eckstein, artistic practice will be presented as a means of urban investigation on a speculative level.

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 space 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.

This ensemble of cultural institutions was intended to counter the Berlin Museum Island containing the Old National Gallery, which was included in the Soviet sector of the city. Potsdamer Platz, 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 a "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 a shift towards the previous center – literally called Mitte, or the center – and a desire to rebuild Potsdamer Platz into an active urban nucleus, also encompassing a shift away from the Kulturforum.

Potsdamer Platz is today a business and entertainment district, often identified with Berlin's annual film festival, the Ber-

linale and the Sony Center (Helmut Jahn, 1998-2000), one of the key festival cinemas and an evocative visitor destination. The area has become a collection of high-rises conveying 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 Scharouns's (1967-68) Staatsbibliothek (State Library) once looked out over the void surrounding the Berlin wall, it now abuts the back of Renzo Piano's Theater am Potsdamer Platz (finished 1998). The Staatsbibliothek once stood as a border of the Kulturforum, separating it off from the 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 Kulturforum appears neglected. Furthermore, as an emphasis has been placed on the restoration and re-conceptualization of the museums of the Museumsinsel in Mitte, in the former Soviet sector, the purpose of the Kulturforum has been called into question.

The forum was planned by Scharoun in the 1960s as a type of Stadtkrone (City Crown) in which a utopian concentration of art and culture should evolve (Bernau, 2014). It was designed according to the ideal of an open and automobile-orientated urban space. 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 Nikolaus Bernauer (2014) notes, congenial to the flâneur. Concepts of what the Kulturforum should be continue to be formulated and debated, so that the utopian ideals of the Kulturforum 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 of the city of Berlin and which speaks to the nature of space, as a movement between the phenomenal situation and a field of ideas and images.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau* (1984: 92) writes, "The desire to see the city preceded the means of satisfying it." The perspectival image of the city allowed for a vision of it that at the time of its inception remained a fiction. 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" (de Certeau, 1984: 93). The space of the Kulturforum does as yet escape any totalizing vision as its evocative, but disparate elements (Neue Nationagalerie, Philharmonie, Gemäldegalerie, etc.) do not correlate into a unified vision. "Raum" graffitied onto a rusty steel girder separating the Matthäi-Kirchplatz – a park-like setting of the forum – from the sidewalk further emphasizes its disparate character. Stone and metal sculptures are scattered around the sparse and seldom-visited park area. But "Raum", meaning space, invites the recipient to see and experience the open and non-spectacular space of the setting. Once reflected upon, the site becomes a series of discoveries, 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. Sloping 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 seem inhospitable to the museum guest, it was once frequented by skateboarders who appreciated the multiple levels and open space, but are now kept out through newly installed barriers, prohibiting this impermissible activity.

The Tension of Creative Space

Spray painting and skateboarding utilize the forum in a non-intended and non-sanctioned manner. Discussing risk, public space and skateboarding, Iain Borden (2008: 154-158) sees skateboarding 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.

Non-intentional use of space creates a tension, as well as a sense of playfulness and discovery. In discussing image and movement in cinema, Gilles Deleuze (2008: 163) speaks of the "power of the false" as thinking that which is not thought, or seeing that which is not seen through disturbance. Irri-

tation as a juxtaposition of heightened artificialities may perform an inducement to thinking. In the urban environment, the dissonance of spatial trajectories often contains a potentiality for experiencing beyond an exchange-value based vision. Art production as creative activity can involve a practice of space in such a potential sense. Potential space, understood in reference to Donald Winnicott (2005) lies between illusion and reality, between subjectivity and objectivity. It is a type of playing in that the creative dimension of forming the object world is accentuated and the subject is the creator of the objects, just as much as the objects exist in and of themselves.

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 the city as a potential and creative space. Bringing out the potentiality of space in his work, the Berlin-based artist Knut Eckstein disturbs the totalizing formulation of spatial-visual orders, especially in terms of how the public realm is conceived. In 2009, I collaborated with the artist in working on an exhibition thematizing public space in Giessen, Germany.2 We asked him to contribute a work that would facilitate open debate and reflection upon public space in the exhibition zwölfeinhalb (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 makeshift gathering spots.

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. The artist titled the Giessen project détournement in reference to the Situationist technique of

taking elements from commercial culture, subverting and simultaneously engaging with them in another context (Sadler, 1988). 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 was hung from the ceiling at the entrance of the exhibition, suggesting that the ensemble could function as a theater, a place of spectacle, 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 to playfully engage with each other in using the space. In researching for the exhibition, the artist spoke with the university students regarding the history of the 1968 protests in Gießen, a city known for a certain leftist tendency. 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-profitable 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 out in Knut Eckstein's constructions: imaginative interspatial 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 further exploring and reflecting upon public space in Berlin.

Knut Eckstein Speaking on the Strategy of the Provisional3
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 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-ins" 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

Knut Eckstein's installations are curiously juxtaposed into given situations. They draw from their environments, re-arranging textual, visual and structural materials to stimulate alternative, but site-inherent modes of communication. In considering how a critically artistic approach to space could broaden conventional modi 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 into focus. Employing the method of the dérive, or the drift, the Situationists wandered about the city letting themselves be led by ambiences, discovering socio-psychological relations, often the result of unintended arrangements (Sadler, 1998). Exploring Berlin, we were drawn to a counterpole to Potsdamer Platz: Bebelplatz on Unter den Linden. Like Potsdamer Platz, it is intended to be 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) (Böhne and Schmidt, 2000). It represented Prussian Berlin as a cultural center and as a place of tolerance (the Catholic cathedral in the Protestant kingdom) and was later 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 (Roth and Frajman, 1999). 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 (1820), "That was only a prelude, there where they burn books, in the end they burn people." Bibliothek is easily overlooked as it consists of an underground and empty library – empty white bookshelves

– that 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 August Bebel, a co-founder of the Social Democratic Party and publicist (Böhne and Schmidt, 2000).

Bebelplatz is thus another 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 on the problem of appropriate housing for the refugees.

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 this is in fact the site of the famous opera house. This is a cogent contrast, as the construction objects also recall elements of makeshift dwellings, again calling into consciousness a current need for socially functioning spaces and not just representational ones. Groups of tourists are guided through the square and told how to comprehend it, 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 highjacks the vision of the space through an insertion of an opposed and imagined spatial experience. The current transitory character points both to an ideal future vision of the square, while also allowing for critical reflection on the use and purpose of public spaces. Questions arise as to whom they are designed for, how such spaces can truly express a sense of inclusion, and how they can facilitate meaningful discourses. Inserted into historically and culturally charged sites, the phrases "refu-

gees welcome," "§ 23 Bleiberecht" and "Raum" slip through the cracks of staged spatial images, recalling the uniqueness of the present spatial conditions. Subversive signs and acts, coupled together with the contingent provisional states they are now in, transform many of Berlin's public areas into potential spaces for thinking of the city differently.

Conclusion

With the opening up of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and with German Reunification in 1990, Berlin began a process of transformation in which past and forgotten associations resurfaced and new ones were posited. Not only did repressed and neglected memories reemerge, but other histories were abased, such as with the destruction of the Palace of the Republic to be replaced by an attenuated modern reconstruction of the City Palace of Berlin (Berliner Stadtschloss). Potsdamer Platz recalls urban leitmotifs, such as early twentieth century Chicago, rather than just the prewar ensemble. The city remains a kaleidoscope of contrasting spatial-temporal arrangements. Into what coherent form the city shall develop remains in question. Its still present transitional character is in fact the source of its evocative draw. Out of this complexity emerges an increasing drive to unify Berlin's urban visions, yet the city still offers the possibility for creative engagement. Such a rethinking has been proposed here in terms of a suggestive expansion of sites which the recipient is called to self-consciously engage with and create. Artistic production has been understood as the playful production of space in which normative spatial arrangements are corrupted to give voice to a type of social dreaming. Public sites thus can be potentially produced in the activity of interspatial thinking.

Notes

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2 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. Available at: http://www.giessen-tourismus.de/de/termine-tickets/ausstellun-gen/269/

3 The following section encompasses remarks by Knut Eckstein from September 2014 regarding his work as a subversion of normative spatial experiences.

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Figure 1: Kulturforum with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie

Figure 2: View of Potsdamer Platz from Kulturforum with Sony Center
and the Kollhoff Tower

Figure 3: Knut Eckstein, spacepark, logosign and box accumulation, 2002

Figure 4: Knut Eckstein, 'unsicheres terrain (on a shaky ground), Budapest, 2012

Figure 5: Bebelplatz with construction containers

Figure 6: Clock with refugees welcome graffiti at Bebelplatz