

ÖFFENTLICHER RAUM PUBLIC SPACE
SALZBURG
LEHEN

VERLAG ANTON PUSTET

The Monument Lover

(I have never been to the Statue of Liberty)

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We can propose an imaginary protagonist to narrate the despondency that many practitioners feel these days regarding the possibility of the creative transformation of public spaces – a figure that embodies an attempt to refuse the relentless logic of a modern, rationalized configuration of urban life. This is someone who purposefully or unconsciously ignores the spatial and symbolic directives of urban infrastructures that have been designed for efficiency and order. This character would be called a “loiterer” or a “deadbeat”. We can call this protagonist M-.

Believing in idleness as sublime in its own right, M- inadvertently and absent-mindedly figures a resistance to the contemporary inheritance of both the industriousness of managed capital and the morality of evangelical religion. Drifting along the margins and crevices of the city, M- finds expression in the things left out and left over from the ongoing machinations of a normalized urban routine. Such a character is committed to a kind of laziness that emphasizes an archaic sense of wonder towards cultural policy and its ensnaring polity. M- is a kind of ambulance chaser, following the confining reinvention of monumental culture in order to find places where one can reconstitute the effects of modern life in ways that confound authority. M- is a figure who never went to the Statue of Liberty because it was rehabilitated in 1986 to prevent access to the one place you could fall in love with a stranger: the scary precipice of the outstretched, torch holding, hand.

Professionalism is poison to M-. M- gently critiques the various ways that professional urban subjects articulate their relationship with public space. When a detective is asked to characterize his understanding of a town square, he might recount the capacity of the planned foliage to hide the guilty from his pursuit. A professor, looking down from on high, might find a diagram for measuring and disbursing the social science and statistics necessary to devise some new master narrative or interpretative guideline. Meanwhile, a student may find a way to please the professor by recounting in taxonomic hierarchy, the alignment, number and dimensions of the assorted spaces. The architect across town, unless accustomed to the beautiful perversity of trying to unplan the expectations of an underlying bureaucracy, sees the town square as an emblem of a utopian ordering of public life. Such experts often overlook the disciplining of bodies that is scaled up in grand urban designs to initiate a coercion of the crowd itself.

M- forgoes the way professional cynicism accommodates the places of public participation as objects of study, because for the loiterer the only way to realize expansive notions of the self is to try to upset the increasingly streamlined and privatized nature of urban spaces. Faced with the tableaux of rationalized pleasure and interaction often referred to as the “public sphere”, our loiterer is seeking (though never encouraged) to design a more fugitive idea of space as a relationship within which things can be put together in ways that will symbolically

disrupt the smooth organization of exchange. That's why M- is always milling around town, acting unruly and acting out, quietly.

A certain category of artistic production can be seen to be complicit in the agenda of urban renewal insofar as artistic labor is easily recognizable as merely a modification of the commercial rationalization of urban infrastructures. The singular effort by some artists to record or define oppressive systems of representation embodied by political agencies often reveals an amnesia concerning anything not distorted by the commercial sector. Although extremely well meaning, such work often continues the narrative of authoritative design gestures in public spaces by reacting to them reductively. Representations of "empowered" communities have instrumentalized much of art's discursive capability into an inadvertent engagement with the furthering of urban rationalization. By concentrating on the political designation of neighborhoods and groups rather than the economic and spatial relationships that determine the political condition of urban residents, many artistic and cultural projects fail to escape incorporation into the "revitalization" of urban infrastructures. From Skulptur Projekt '97 in Münster, Germany, to The Three Rivers Arts Festival in Pittsburgh, PA, art agencies in collaboration with city governments have repeatedly tried to reappraise urban identity through the use of monumental critical gestures. Such spectacular scenery often does little more than recreate strict parameters for dissidence by marginalizing collective and individual struggles into well managed "festivals". Worse, such cultural organizing tends to merely highlight the unique characteristics of one urban setting against another by simplifying complex subjective understandings of identification with geographical locations.

As cities search for ways to produce visual distinction from each other through art's symbolic capital, new procedures for naming urban spaces appear with art festivals; and the reappraisal of real estate itself not far behind. Maria Eichorn has aptly demonstrated this by buying a parcel of land in her contribution to Skulptur Projekt '97 entitled "Erwerb des Grundstücks Ecke Tibusstraße/Breul/, Gemarkung Münster, Flur 5, 1997". It is heartening to see that an artist can use the framework of a site-specific arts festival like Skulptur Projekt to reveal art's determining role in reorganizing real-estate values. As other artists and critics have tried to point out as well, the official guise of community based art production, or "new genre public art", even if originating in more progressive forms of critique amongst practitioners themselves, has recently been arranged to re-enforce the idea of city as a paradigm of controlled and developed appetites.

M- would likely see the hidden logic of art tourism in the introduction of new forms of public art programs as the expected promotion of places against the backdrop of landscapes that have been leveled to indistinction by Gaps and KFCs. The surveyed homogeneity of a city plan that streamlined consumption demands, prevents the production of unknown, original or surprising spaces.





M- would probably also remember that as the city becomes more homogenized through commercialized “renewal”, its citizens are increasingly abstracted by the needed influx of demographic study. Without a predictable science of markets, the new city plan can become unprofitable. New denizens become universalized in a categorical regime reflective of the city’s planned commercialization of its streets and pathways. Accordingly, these passages are built in ways that are unavailable for loitering, an attempt to prevent individuated use and improvisational consumption. All the occupants are demographically pre-selected to appear only where needed.

M- might then therefore search for spaces that are not quantifiable through traditional statistical research. Loiterers need to develop more specific understanding of place because the successful vagrant must know the nooks and crannies that certain areas will provide. Always using the city but never “at home”, M- finds respite in a use of the city that still goes on in the form of drifting through its subaltern and subterranean cavities – of finding interactive spaces in criminal escape from the surveying control of the urban masterpiece. M-’s escape is into unapproved uses of places within the city’s walls. When the details of a design can be understood, M- can even try to use the Gap differently. Seemingly in contradiction to the European tradition of public space as an ever-present residue of the absolutist influence of monarchy or church, America’s streets developed as the only publicly contestable locations within the unforgiving mapping of the landscape by industrialism. Without the piazza or boulevard, citizens had to find discursive space on their own block, on stoops and in bars. Such an economy of expression reinforces the public invisibility of the majority in the town square and the factory floor. Whenever the have-nots attempted to congregate outside local, secret or subaltern spaces, such acts constitute the terms of a major territorialization that eventually led to the American labor wars of the nineteenth century. Loitering became illegal in American cities when workers started coming together in places other than their own kitchens and front porches. Nineteenth century America legislated public space and encouraged violent police reaction against collective public practices to prevent the enfranchisement of the majority.

America has an unfortunate habit of deforming all it’s darkest bits of expression out of political decision and into personal choice. Destruction, escape, and preservation are all often disarranged and re-expressed in ways that will keep the city streets regulated and confined. In charting the complex relationship that the American citizenry has had to the logic of the city, the imaginary and subaltern arenas of celebration that the loiterer confirms are clearly difficult to find. Non-rational exercises within American culture are consistently repressed by historical and media representation, but even when visible these desires are usually modified or disarranged to take on surprisingly twisted forms of expression. One dominating trend these days is the phenomena of escape from urbanism



altogether. Originating in the seclusionary enfranchisement of the bourgeois apartment as a sanctuary from the chaos of the street, developing into the impermeable logic of suburbanization, escape now seems to rest on the false necessity to begin the city anew on newly privatized terms. Four million Americans now live in closed off, gated, private communities; separate towns or villages that are protected by security forces responsible only to the residents themselves. The population of these places tends toward the white and republican variety of Americans, those most often collectively rejecting the idea of paying for the public space outside their immediate neighborhood. These residents spring from the long-standing antigovernment tradition in America as well the belief in the vast and protected accumulation of wealth. When citizens retreat into these havens, separating themselves both physically and ideologically from the urban whole, traditional urban renewal agendas, such as public parks and reduced income housing, are negated. The level of restrictions established by the governing boards of these communities range from the standardization of backyard landscaping to the right to own a gun. Loitering, of course, is expressly forbidden.

Without apparent irony, the populations of these towns regularly agree to policies that they would otherwise reject for the country at large – such as strict environmental protections that apply to all those species that co-habitate within the guarded gates. The protected species of fishes and birds are only able to be seen exclusively by the residents and their guests, examples of a protected spectacle in the realm of exclusion. Nature as a calmed comic version of itself is even more extensively evident in Florida where Walt Disney Inc. has recently filled its own private city, Celebration, with new Americans ready to fulfill the private fantasy of escape in the shadow of Disneyworld. Such a benevolent fortress was, of course, one of Walt's original dreams for Florida and for the world.

A different reaction to escapism is preservation. Modern cities have long experiences of the failures of urban renewal fads, from the housing projects of skirting neighborhoods to the central pedestrian malls in small towns meant to offset the economic effects of suburban shopping emporiums. Even the offices for public assistance have relocated to the suburban highway contexts of megastores and gas stations. Crucial to the re-designation of a downtown area as distinct from the mallification of the suburbs is the supposed revitalization of these areas as unique in their proximity to the energy that artistic expression provides to a citizen understood only as a consumer. Spending tax money on the arts rather than on schools and hospitals in a society where large segments of the population remain under served in these areas may seem ridiculous. But when the arts are presented as a practical extension of the evangelism that supports liberal reformist thinking on urban identities, "saving the city" and "making a new context for art" are two phrases that can be spoken in the same breath and without real connection. Although revitalization without restructuring

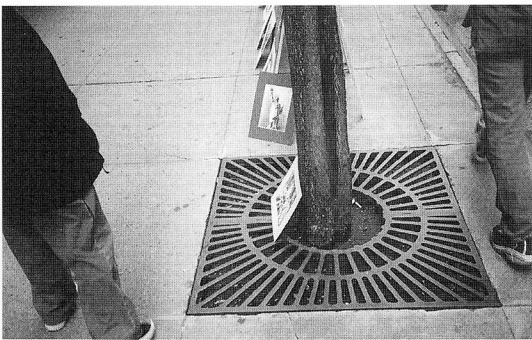


wealth may seem illogical in this context, it seems to be in application all over the country.

Over the last 10 years alone, arts capital building expenses have risen dramatically to as much as \$5 billion spent all over the country. The creation of "arts centers" and the refurbishing of "historic districts" is definitely the new momentum for urban renewal efforts in American downtowns. The traditional architectural manifestation of this process is the "arts district" and the arts festival that temporally or spatially confine art projects into predictable consumable constructions. Newark, NJ, just spent \$180 Million on its New Jersey Center for the performing Arts meant to rehabilitate neighborhoods still devastated by the rebellions of the late sixties; Philadelphia is beginning a \$330 Million projects entitled the "Avenue of the Arts"; San Jose, CA, has undergone the rebuilding their art museum; similar projects are being started in Ft Lauderdale, Anchorage, Kansas City, San Francisco and dozens of other cities and municipalities. There are now 60 newly designated "cultural districts" in the country paid for largely with local tax dollars. All this coincides with the NEA cut in arts spending from \$176 million in 1992 to \$96 million today, which has eliminated many categories of granting altogether. Meanwhile, local governments have increased their spending on the arts by more than 5% a year during this period. It seems of immense importance that accompanying the recent privatization of the American cultural scene comes a concurrent localization of cultural capital.

Such investment in the nature of localities demands a concordant attention to promotion. These days, cities advertise themselves as much as shirt companies and soft drink manufacturers. As new advertising strategies have proven, a shopper no longer needs to directly identify with the attitude or image an advertisement proposes for the commodity represented to be activated in as a public fantasy. A consumer now is free to embrace an ad as interlocutor, encouraged to perceive the art of advertising as having an unrelated, even neutral relationship to the actual need for objects that will satiate desire or need. Clearly the management of desire no longer needs to describe itself as limited to one sphere or another of human experience. Similarly perhaps, the management of public space in terms of what citizens are allowed and encouraged to perform there, has not required the direct involvement of the police for quite a while. (Although in recent New York history the forcible removal of squatters building and tent villages from parks has been systematic and brutal.) To the managers of public spaces, a festival, or an art center might be much more persuasive than a baton. Just as in the new advertising strategies that include left political methods and aesthetics to sell sweaters, an artist working in marginal neighborhoods on a public art project can legitimate the smooth uninterrupted authority of urban renewal.

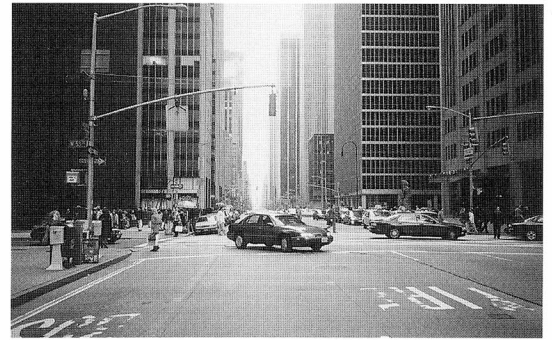
The loiterer has no place in any of these contexts: the gated city, the preserved downtown as art center, or the city as an abstract commodity sign. None of



these new urban models provide the inarticulated spaces necessary for the survival of critical wandering. The trajectory described by these kinds of "progress" present to many pedestrians in this country an either-or proposition on the future of American public culture. Either accept the twisted philosophy of do-it-yourselfism in the gated towns or commit to the "humanizing" influence of urban renewal as a spectacle of displacement similar to advertising. When artists enter public art dialogues, they risk lubricating the smooth expansion of the commercial sector into spaces previously thought occupied only by outcasts. The pacification of loiterers is central to the realization of the city as an empty sign – escaped and turned into an empty logo. Art which seeks to engage this struggle in defense of loitering can never appear as a form of social work but instead must be able to be seen as a form of social practice. As latent formulations of the dreams that those of us outside the gates can deposit for future use, successful artworks may mean leaving the large critiques of our economy to other outfits and concentrating on the unconscious spheres of every day forms of resistance.

Good artists like good criminals, know that the retrieval of autonomy from the increasingly regulated arena of public life mandates a sophisticated understanding of the forces that produce and manage that control. This may mean bypassing nineteenth-century models of centrally organized collective actions for the possibilities of subjective rebellion that inspired the formulation of such models in the first place. Instead of repeating the critical forms which are now in alignment with macro spectacles, artists and critics could force new recognitions of the institutional locations of power. The competition and reconciliation between friends, the memories of lost intimacies, the chance alignment of personal and public desire – all could provide cultural forms that avoid simple sociological reduction. Other transgressive potential lies in artists as citizen-loiterers refusing to accept what is already scripted for their interactions by the commercial designation of space and language. This implies a kind of laziness in the face of efficient social work categories of activism and responsibility. Stealing and altering the spaces and signs that make up the modern city for their own uses, artists can model the act of claiming the city that other inhabitants can use in their own contexts.

The artist, like M-, could then describe each space as having its own particular character of compliance AND resistance. For M- it hardly matters whether making policy from pranks or pranks from policy if the final effect is to inspire a re-evaluation of the rules and regulations that enforce the spatial orientations of citizens. The list of these spaces could come from a vast array of possible sites that would include both monumental arenas easily represented as ripe for intervention, such as state apparatuses, as well as the more mediated configurations of power such as the department store, the hospital, and the sports arena. Likely spots such as the Statue of Liberty and unlikely ones such as Nike Town and the



Disney Store can both be addressed according to the specific language of coercion they propose. Neither category will be truly perceivable as material for reconfiguration until artists begin drawing many cognitive maps for the non-rational use of these public spaces.

This essay is indebted to Maureen P. Sherlock's article "No Loitering, Art as Social Practice," published in *Art Papers*, Vol. 14, No. 1, and to Miwon Kwon's "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," published in *October*, No. 80, Spring 1997. I was particularly inspired in this writing by the lecture given by Helen Molesworth at the Vermont College MFA in Visual Arts winter 1998 residency entitled "Slapstick and Laziness: The Ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp." For more on the specific relationship of my collaboration with Group Material to ideas addressed in this essay, please see my "Notes for a Public Artist," published in Christian Philipp Müller's *Kunst auf Schritt und Tritt*, Kellner Verlag Hamburg, 1997.

