

The Accidental Activist

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A lot of people around us seem to be spontaneously 'doing it' together, as a multitude of artists, researchers and architects turn into urbanists engaging in the invention and reconnection of everyday life functions in both material and virtual public spaces. These kinds of micro-political projects celebrate connectivity and interactivity and often try to create a site-specific, heterotopic platform of common experimentation, reflection and creation. In the art world, this has almost become a genre of its own and is sometimes labelled a social laboratory paradigm. Many of these interdisciplinary practices seem to satisfy a need to expand the field of art practice that is not media specific, and secure art as a useful tool within the production of knowledge and human good, as if the artistic subject had some specific knowledge and ethic imbedded in itself. Most often, these kinds of projects only try to create a sense of local communality; more seldom they try to deal with matrices of social discrimination, for example, sexism and racism, and how these are spatially distributed. In this text we will take a closer look not at such intentionally political art projects, that we do have experience of. Rather, we want to discuss a similar phenomenon that is intentionally not thought of as either art or political activism, but which is at some point becoming-activism. This is what we call *accidental activism*.

To get a background of how this concept is constructed, we first need to make a somewhat unfair caricature of artistic and interdisciplinary urban activism. For us it seems that underlying this urban activist trend is an institutionalised reading of 'French theory' (the name used in the US for a kind of soaked mishmash of post-war phenomenology, psychoanalysis, structuralism and post-structuralism) that allows for a mainstreamed critical standpoint on how the limits of power and representation are drawn in public space. This theoretical appropriation is commonly legitimised by the idea that misreadings are creative, critical and liberating practices in themselves. In other words, cultural development is due to "bad" translations and "false" appropriations. Within this discourse, sceptical of utopias, the notions of the modern society of discipline has been followed by the vision of the control society where surveillance is everywhere; this in turn is countered by a reading of de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which describes how resistant creative practices could emerge from within these power and control structures, constituted through the actualisations of immanent potentialities. *Potentiality* (with the

hidden reference to Spinoza) is the buzzword that has made contemporary art wholesome after the supposed execution of the Kantian aesthetics. The common (mis)understanding here seems to be that power, even when completely decentralised and individually as well as collectively internalized, still seems to hold the position of an absolute enemy that can be countered through tactical practice, for example in the form of 'creative' interventions. This understanding mixes up two different concepts of power, one discursive and one antagonistic, without really taking this challenge seriously.

We are thinking of projects that are all about using whatever is at hand to make participants engage in creative production as a goal in itself, as opposed to a practice that intends to find a common meaning in a chaotic world. Connectivity and interactivity are concepts now part of our everyday life, yet many artistic projects still celebrate these as good *per se*, establishing a new kind of public service ethos which follows a DIY (Do It Yourself) model of empowerment. We are not saying that these activism-tinged art projects are counterproductive in principle, but we find it strange how seldom such projects take into account that transgression, hybridisation and interdisciplinary practices have become habitual and affirmative within the regulatory forces of neo-liberal capitalism. They also rest on an unresolved problem that concerns the very idea of public space (or more precisely, the dichotomy public/private) as one of the founding principles of democracy. On the one hand, we have the public space in the classical Greek and Roman sense, as *agora/forum* – always based on some form of inclusion/exclusion, an empty square vacated by those representing only themselves. But on the other hand, there is the understanding of public space as regulated by a representational form where the function of the actors has been decided by social groups in a prior, self-reflecting process of consensus-making. The latter understanding has become even more important in the age of a mass mediated public space, in other words, in the age of representative parliamentary democracy. Generally speaking, most of the intentionally micro-political urban art projects of today do not seem to question the normative idea of public and private spaces, even though what is considered to be private and public is contingent and a question of relationality.

Escaping Public Space, Escaping Particularisation

This is where we think accidental activism is an important concept. We want to argue that this kind of praxis challenges the constructed dominating images of public space, both the ideal Greek *agora* where 'everybody' is represented with their own bodies situated in the public space, and the Habermasian idea of public space as a place of mediation and consensus-making through self-reflection. In doing so, we hope to contribute to how we can think democracy and politics without referring to the presence (or absence) of a common universal ground or ontological fundament. The praxis within public space that we are going to discuss is not an intentionally political praxis in the form proposed by situationism or the 'reclaim the streets' movement. It is also neither purely consumption praxis, nor an attempt at moulding public opinion. And it is definitely not any politically correct and relational contemporary art project that intends to make 'different' people meet, in the name of something. Instead, we are going to take a look at a *civil* practice of leisure in a specific kind of newly designed public space. This actual praxis is mainly about having a good time,

but it has still managed to become a case of political activism – an activism that cannot very easily be particularised as ‘only political activism’ or ‘only art’ or ‘only everyday life’.

This is an important point, since particularisation has become perhaps the most common way to dismantle political activities in liberal democracies. In this climate, ethnicity particularisation based on the idea of cultural identity has become the racism of multicultural society. And we are afraid that old French heroes, such as Foucault, Deleuze or de Certeau, cannot help us much in the way they are most commonly appropriated in the Western mainstream of critical thought, without being captivated by the power of Freudian melancholia. What is the point of arguing that everyday practices are genuinely flexible, self-reflective or rhizomatic, creative and intelligible, when this is precisely the main demand of the global market economy? The insights of these French thinkers are important indeed, and their concepts are useful, particularly in the fields of feminist, postcolonial and queer theory, even though the face of the enemy has changed since the days of the Cold War when most of them wrote their most important works. Still, it does not seem enough to assert that everything is discursively constituted, and that through our actions and operations, we are reproducing and changing these discourses in relation to our contingent position within networks of discourses. It seems that this problem has become increasingly crucial since the launch of new labour politics, first in the UK and then in places like Denmark and Sweden. When all parties are heading for the middle position, the parliamentary system has in itself institutionalised an implicit critique of identity politics that is far from the one Foucault and Deleuze outlined, but which still bears alarming similarities. It is not surprising that both neo-liberals and post-Marxists love to compete in the game of referring to Foucault and Deleuze in the most bizarre ways, especially when dealing with the common disease of identity phobia and anti-representationalism.

It takes a lot of guts to ‘speak for others’ in the politics of today, even if the subalterns sometimes cannot speak for themselves. Our opinion is that one does not become innocent or ethically safe just because one only represents oneself, and one’s own identity. At a time when political struggle for the realisation of ‘common good’ utopias such as the welfare state is no longer really at stake on a parliamentary level, identity politics enter the arena as one of the main concerns of liberal democracy. Why is it that the EU project remains bureaucratically limp while engaging in unashamed identity branding? Large-scale struggles are simply too risky when the thing that counts is the quarterly reports of multinational companies and their next moves. Almost every political question on a parliamentary level is presented in terms of right and wrong – as an ‘ethical problem’. This binary presentation seems to suggest that as long as we present issues in terms of ethics of doing the right or wrong thing, everybody is included; that once we have made the right choice, everybody benefits and no violence is committed. As if the act of doing the right thing would necessarily mean to commit a completely non-violent act.

The equivalent logic prevalent in a public art context is that an art project is good if different people get together to do something. Classical, non-ironic monumental practices are not that popular in contemporary art. All too often, the vantage point in anti-monumental contemporary public art projects can be characterised as being based on a confused mix of perspectives of public space, saying on the one hand that there can be no pre-

constituted meaning of a public space dictating its use; and on the other, that specific groups within the city must *reclaim* 'their' space and their use of it. Taking into account the two conflicting points of view on public space as outlined roughly earlier, this position becomes highly contradictory. This seems to reflect, in a somewhat nasty way, the dominant procedure of today's postcolonial identity politics, where an idea of particular identities as being *a priori* always in the making is a necessity in order to make space for consumer choice. These politics operate by a logic which claims the right to identity while at the same time prohibiting social actors from thinking about the multiple places from which those identities can be conceptualised and constructed.

'Monumental' Identity Politics

Maybe in times such as these, even though the old logic of the material monument with universal pretensions has fallen to pieces, there is a need of turning back to The Monument, to locate *its* virtual properties that are not simply waiting or *wanting* to be actualised, but are already so. We will discuss an architecture fair as a monumental practice – in the middle of this shift – since the monument is hard to think of outside the idea of a political public space: a space of different interests and therefore a space of conflicts – always already in opposition on some level. The practice in question here is not simply the production of this kind of neo-monument, but rather the practice of the excluded civil actors – in the very imagination of this site – and who have come back to haunt it in the form of what we have proposed as a form of *accidental activism*. Since it is impossible to control one's identity over time and space, projects such as the ambitious architecture fair *Bo01* in Malmö concerned with the political identity of cities, have become never-ending stories of monumental identity politics. An event like a fair and a brand new space for living the good life is only a strategically essential point – a possibility to rest a mo(nu)ment, one could say. But the work of *accidental activists* disturbs this resting.

This example of 'accidental activism' in Sweden is situated in relation to the infamous architecture and planning fair *Bo01* (translated as Living in the Year 2001). With this fair, the city of Malmö got an attractive new shoreline with exclusive housing overlooking the bridge between Sweden and Denmark, a view symbolising the making of the new competitive 'inter-region'. The fair, and the West Harbour area in which it is located, have been constituted as a kind of nodal centre for global capital to hang on to; an anchor point in an economy where value and capital is more or less fluid. Such a project – concerned with identity politics, assisted by city planners, architects, designers and artists – has become very popular when regions and cities want to change their image and, accordingly, their identity. These projects of identity branding try to create virtual monuments rather than material ones, and in doing so they simultaneously render the materiality of the architecture into a virtual commemoration of the future. Perhaps we can say that it is exactly at this mo(nu)ment that architecture becomes inseparable from mediating technologies such as photography, film and text. On the technological level, this is most obvious in the process of media convergence through digitalisation. Architecture and urban space have not only become an image; this image has also made a life outside media unthinkable. To buy an apartment is therefore always to buy an image that has both a relation to modernist aesthetic autonomy as well as to the functionality

of architecture. As Hal Foster has argued, not only have commodity and sign become inseparable: so have also commodity and space.

As many of the expensive apartments and houses at *Bo01* failed to attract buyers and the accompanying exhibition failed to attract visitors, leading the fair to bankruptcy, the area quickly became desolate. It is hard to say if the common image of the site as an elite area for the rich where 'no one' would want or could afford to live had an influence, leading to an absence of buyers. Malmö has for a long time been a typical working-class town with big industries that has just recently established its own university and a symbolic (as well as real) bridge to 'the continent' in the form of the bridge to Copenhagen. At the same time, the town has also turned into the most segregated city in Sweden when it comes to parameters such as ethnicity and social class. The grand project, the first large-scale living and architecture fair in the EU of the new millennium, with all its efforts towards ecological sustainability, turned out to be conceptually in opposition to the dominating idea of old Malmö as essentially a working-class city. And, frankly speaking, the monumental project of *Bo01* was not initially able to subvert or overcome this hegemonic identity of Malmö. At least not according to the original purpose of the project leaders and city planners.

However, the fabrication and construction of a new idea of Malmö as a centre for the knowledge industry and Information Technology business seems to prevail, even though this particular identity project did not turn out to be immediately successful, according to both project leaders as well as reactionary forces in mainstream public life. These contrasting views of the built environment could be seen as a testimony to oppositional qualities inherent to the practice of planning and architecture. In this particular example, these oppositional qualities have generated new and unexpected uses. The normative architectonic act of installing *Bo01* became a generative one, since the original marketing idea of *Bo01* was transgressed by its projected 'others', and their unexpected use of the area. It might come as no surprise that these others are mostly people living in the suburbs on the other side of town. These acts of appropriation would not have been possible without the actual realisation of the architectonic reference of "The New Malmö" in the form of *Bo01*. The case of "raising the monument" as a violent action constituted the possibility for unacceptable civil actions. And at one point these actions transform into activism. This occurs when it becomes clear to the unexpected users of the space that they are using and reorganising the space in a way that does not fit with the ideas of the governing politicians, the city planners and the project leaders.

The New Beach

The new beachfront, extending from the traditional sand beach of Malmö, has been used for pleasure and socialising by citizens from all over the city, including those who were originally the most excluded from the area, i.e., the people living in Malmö's suburban and generally poorer neighbourhoods. We have to remember that 'these people' do not fit within the framework of the image builders of the Malmö City elite. They are living on another 'island', and it (at least initially) seemed as if there was no bridge to that island in the minds of the city planners. Excluding 'them' and their 'home spaces', the segregated suburban zones, from the project of re-branding Malmö could be understood as the constituting

action for the project as a whole. And now they, the excluded 'others', are haunting this violent identity project on a material level, just by using a space that they were not supposed to, since they did not have the money to buy an 'environmentally sustainable' apartment in the area. This appropriation, however, is not about reclaiming a place, or intentionally and politically challenging the architectonic identity project. In other words, they do not think of their actions as intentionally subversive, or even political at all. But at the moment when they want to improve the functionality of the space, and they come in contact with politicians and bureaucrats accountable for that, then it becomes clear that it has been a case of *accidental activism* all along.

Accidental Activism and the (Metro)Polis

The new beachfront was not built for bathing purposes, yet elements in its design were (mis)interpreted as utilities for going into the water. Or rather, appropriation seemed to be more relevant than interpretation. After all, it looked like a nice public space by the sea. Why would one spend time interpreting the true essence and purpose of the space, the way it has been formulated by the entrepreneurs, when one is not a part of the project at all, even though it concerns one's own city? This ignorance – as a result of being excluded – made the accidental activism possible. And the characteristic incident is what we call the Scout case. This was the case of the notorious so-called 'Scouts' – small platforms extending into the water at regular intervals along the otherwise hostile and stony shore. At the end point of each Scout are metallic handles and steps that were naturally treated as steps *into* the water – when in fact the City Council had clearly stated that according to the 'Detail Plan', the area is not meant for bathing and that the Scouts were only meant to take you to the water, with the steps providing a means to climb *out of* the water should you be so unlucky as to accidentally fall into it. The oceanic landscape here becomes a screen both mediated by, and itself mediating, the newly built architecture.

However, the 'other' appropriators of this staged visual spectacle simply did not restrict themselves to the roles of a few urban *flaneurs* happily strolling along the new shoreline as envisioned by the entrepreneurs, the 'ideal inhabitants' and the Malmö City Council. Several 'outside' users of this space found out, however, that it was really easy to slip and hurt oneself while going into the water. After a number of accidents had taken place, people responded by contacting the city council. However, when a citizen asked the city council to provide safer access to the water in the form of anti-slip designs, she was met with disapproval and with the statement that it was not a bathing area, the ambiguous design of the Scouts notwithstanding. The artisans of the *Bo01* had made a material concept, and now they tried to restrict the use of it. Thus the representative of the city council symbolically instituted a 'law' through this regulatory speech act that did not take into account 'other' ways of understanding the meaning of *Bo01*. And if accidents were happening on account of people bathing, it was due to the conflicting views of the actual place: this bathing activity in itself could itself be regarded as an accident.

The immanent conflict in the project of *Bo01* was now actualised, even though this actualisation showed that the force that wanted to dictate what was and was not allowable was not yet hegemonic. The unexpected use by outside users of the space activated the ambiguous nature of the new shoreline design. If we are, however, to talk of any 'inside' users

(in a virtual sense) of the space, we would probably encounter a collective identity much closer to the one dictated by the official plan. A survey in the summer of 2003 showed that most of the inhabitants did not want this illicit bathing to take place in front of their apartments. These inhabitants, who had a representative body in the form of the construction and housing companies behind the area, were demanding prohibitions with reference to the official fact that the bathing area simply *did not exist*. The struggle for hegemony became visible only when one of the 'accidental activists' wanted to improve the design of the beach by getting in contact with the city council. In classic ideas about the public sphere mentioned in the beginning of this essay, there is always a logical relation between the use of the public sphere and the democratic decision-making concerning this use. But in this case it is very difficult to cope with both the Habermasian idea of self-reflection and consensus making *and* the Greek idea of the *agora* where everybody represents themselves. The discourses were so different that the city council would have to give up the vision to which they, together with the investors, construction companies and customers, had committed a lot of money.

Outro

As stated by the programme declaration of a congress of "oppositional architecture" held in Berlin in 2004, where the outlines of our case was first presented: "Corporations, regions, and nation states require spectacular architectures for representative and branding purposes, while the multitude of consumer subjects demand room for individualised privacy". Accidental activism constitutes an activity that cannot be thought of in purely oppositional terms to any of these interests. If so, both the imagined inside capitalist production of space, and the imagined outside – the opposition – become static. This cannot be the case for developing macro- or micro-level identity projects, because when (and if) they stop, they die. Today, the beach of *Bo01* is one of the most popular hangouts during summer in Malmö. There's no doubt that the governing body now has to regard this as a 'happy accident' and restructure the area accordingly. This is effectively a case of actualisation of qualities that could be perceived as oppositional to those of the original sketches of the area – where there was just the right number of curious visitors present, not the excessive crowds of today. The concept of *accidental activism* defines both an individual and a collective action that is not *intentionally* thought of as political activism but has the potential to become that when interacting with dominating institutions. Still, the processes of exclusion and inclusion inherent to planning and building practices become naturalised into the social fabric, rendering the oppositional quality of these processes invisible. It, therefore, becomes necessary to engage in a tracing of the contours of an always and already 'oppositional architecture', leaving the space open for thinking about other kinds of potential accidents.

A brief outline of this case was presented at the Camp for Oppositional Architecture, Anarchitektur Congress, Berlin, June 2004.

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