

Pebbles and crumbs in neoliberal space

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These are improbable times when represented reality bears less and less resemblance to actual reality. The greater the currency of the words freedom and democracy, the more pervasive the forms of social control with new technologies of surveillance and monitoring underpinned by an indefinite War on Terror; the greater the demand for more mobile, more cheap and more flexible labour, the more the significance of borders and impulse to reactive nationalism; the greater the appeal to economic growth, the more the precarity and insecurity in our communities and widening of social division. There is a baroque aesthetic form in the making that extrapolates the world of representation from the world of lived reality to the absolute extreme. It is a grand project of abstraction become viral and truthfully mirrors an economic reality in which monetary exchanges for necessary commodities are a tiny fraction of the amount produced for speculation. In such terms at least, our lived reality is sedimented at the bottom of a seismic flow of transnational speculative capital.

Sustaining a belief out of this falls to the labour of the professional classes today; theirs is the imaginative task of 'consensualising' the contradictions. This make belief world is itself a vast undertaking commissioned outsourced and routinised and in it Culture is the keystone and its producers, including artists have become key functionaries; Art in particular is coveted for this role because it is an 'innocent' child, because its intrinsic value is independent of economic capital, because of its (to quote Bourdieu) 'inverted economy'. Thus Art's iconic currency in the neoliberal mindset has never been higher. Recuperation has reached its zenith. The representational value of oppositional politics, environmental degradation, the visibility of representable Others as subjects crisscross managed and commissioned space; outside in real reality we have now what is conveniently described by Charles Murray as 'custodial democracy' whereby precarious shadow citizens may be erased from the public realm whilst a minority of the electorate participates in the democratic political machine.

In this climate the definition of the public sphere - as sole repository of a meaningful shared collective space is ever more critical. However, firstly we have to consider that space is never only place, it is in fact more importantly process. Alas it is a narrow range of forces that have commandeered space as process. This is all the more so as the contemporary workspace as civil space has been eroded through years of casualisation, downsizing, outsourcing, and flexibilisation. The place of work is no longer the stable associational space for civil interaction and organisation that it once was. And with public space the symbolic hold on it now remains as a historical leftover of Welfare State democracy. But the problem now is not only what Habermas described then as the 'refeudalisation' of the public sphere, whereby the public sphere is surrogate to private interests but the new ways that redefine the 'public'. These involve an assortment of proxy agents: through the heritage industry's rebranding of the cityscape for regeneration; through a global War on Terror which is internalised in the private mindset for the pervasive management of public space; through new agencies as 'trusts' which govern public space through restrictive covenants. By these combined means, the processes of civil organisation and associational culture are circumscribed into designated public 'corridors' where the very concept of the public may be remoulded to neoliberal design.

How this has occurred is as revelatory of neoliberalism as of a decade of concurrent activism. The 90s decade of social movements - radical democratic, feminist, antihierarchical, anti-globalist, anti-racist, anticorporate, environmental - amalgamated into one force-field – the ‘anti-globalisation movement’ or AGM which promised the politics of emergence. This was to be an outcome of (paraphrasing Peter Waterman, Arturo Escobar) a ‘*different logic or model of social organization [which was]... most clearly visible in two domains: digital technologies (cyberspace, as the universe of digital networks, interactions and interfaces); and the sciences of complexity, particularly in biology and other aspects of natural life.*’ The confidence in a social outcome through a logic of means amounted to a form of utopian determinism. In reality, despite the proliferation of affinity groups, horizontal networks, archipelagos of autonomous zones, the movement failed to instrumentalise itself in the actual nuts and bolts of public space. This it could only do by addressing an ecology of activism itself: the relationship and balance between creative construction at the micro level (work which lacks media representation) and protest culture which targets the macro and is often mediated. In-between these two is the building or sustaining the key to it all, the reality of the market: the body of real everyday exchanges that sustains the social order day in day out. And building this, its *real politics* was always secondary to the ideology of the movement. The antiglobalisation movement in the 90s did not disinter the difference that Samir Amin has made to distinguish the market from capitalism to organise a visionable reality for mass reception. The market is a means of exchanging goods for money and purchasing other goods, whilst capitalism is a means of accumulating money, primarily now through speculative means. But while the networks of global activism grew exponentially through the decade into the space of resistance and representation, at the very same time neoliberal capital strove to make Culture instrumental in its means of diversifying its market and strategically entangling social space in its process.

As a result any intervention in public space now intervenes de facto in this neoliberal space as process. An intervention may be classified as such because it seeks no consent, no permission. An intervention is the quintessential aesthetic embodiment of direct action. Equally an intervention is activism per se, an artform that shortcircuits its representation in the culture industry. All the traits of a public urban intervention: its temporal vulnerability, its contestation of symbolic ownership, its dissenting disregard for bureaucracy, its primal immediacy, its unframed exposure, amount to a corporeal embodiment of direct action. What is critical is not the scale, the form, visibility or invisibility, the duration. These are not what matter; even if transitory, even the ‘wasteful’ presence of an ephemeral intervention is of value if to confirm that there exist the subjects willing to do such *work*. This is what an intervention confirms but the why of an intervention as work, the who and for who are creatively produced and linked; an intervention as art is about an aesthetic totality, an imaginary made concrete for the temporal, it is a continuum with life, more a medium than a unitary objectifiable entity. To actively engage with neoliberal space, the intervention, as a medium, may no longer be measured just by the ‘propaganda’ of the deed but more through its imagined place in the larger project of space as process: this is the greater imaginary that requires a complexity of means. A figuration of its role would be akin to the pebbles and breadcrumbs thrown on the ground by Hansel in the Brothers Grimms’ folk tale Hansel and Gretel, in the hope that they may guide them home. The concept of home is the lost unconstructed dimension of neoliberal space, its meaning contingent, negotiable and deferred. As our lives are made precarious, so is our sense of home – thus the private is progressively exposed as a subject as compliant to vast impersonal forces as the

public.

The ground for the urban intervention in public space then changes in its significance as the dimensions of interior space and exterior space re-align with the prevailing hegemonic forces that govern us. The pebbles and crumbs become all the more vital; they can no longer be about only finding a way 'back', but a way of defining all the coordinates. The neoliberal imagination has defined its conceptual terrain radically in terms of total liberalisation of markets and flow of commodities, an infinitely maximising global labour pool, collapsed time zones bound to an endless escape from its own constraints and controls. However far from realising itself as such, the neoliberal image of globalisation is making its own contradictions as the geo-economic increasingly conflicts with new geo-political formations. The singular global progressively evolves into the 'global regionalisms', marked by new cartels and unilateralist interests in the global scrap for resources amidst environmental unsustainability. As Joel Kovel says capitalism has at last discovered its nemesis, not as Marx envisioned in the 19th century, with the proletariat as a revolutionary class but today in the 21st century, with a non human agency: Nature.

The distance between representation and reality is spanned by political force but when stretched to baroque proportions it creates gaps, stretches of new space. Cumulative intervention in these gaps as spaces through the imaginative tasks of bridging, connecting, traversing is being carried out by those placed there – through necessity. Saskia Sassen in her depictions of the global city describes this as the means whereby the new subjects of neoliberal urban space, the large accumulations of the marginalised, the lowly paid, mainly women and immigrants and the Undocumented, acquire presence in 'a broader political process that escapes the boundaries of the formal polity'. This presence signifies the production of a new 'political' as Sassen would put it. With the receding of state provisions and the advent of the casualised network society, the nature of the political so changes, not through the institutional representation but through new processes in a reconfigured notion of society where the sheltering appeal to 'community' evokes wildly conflicting resonances: as an appeal to new repositories of social values and civil exchanges outside of profit extraction and yet, of another appeal for revisionist and reactionary identities, of demarcating social entities.

As Jean-Luc Nancy points out the possibility of community today is not the community defined by old grand narratives or a fixed heritage, but a differentiated 'multi-community' constituted pragmatically, rather than dogmatically. Nancy describes this as is a community of sense, which restores the dimensions of ties and touch, an unity of interiority in the social body. But what processes can produce these dimensions of ties and touch in the neoliberal landscape where for many even the idea of home is transitory? To see the trail of the processes, we may perhaps draw on Elizabeth Grosz' distinction between the *constitutive* subject and *contingent* subject; the constitutive Grosz describes as mutually defining subjects. What begins as contingent may become constitutive through a process of interventions carried out by subjects who are bearers of their own representation. By this process so comes the new political; the new political will take shape through the means the contingent becomes constitutive.

An intervention

An intervention is a contestatory process, not a compliant one. Further an intervention is a medium, not an isolated act. How it constructs its environment, defines itself over time, how it leaves its trace, involves a journey, a passage. As a

medium, an intervention traverses this imagined process of the new political; the passage from contingent to constitutive that is the real site of political contest today and thus subject to pervasive forms of control. The assimilationist or integrationist ideologies, as in multiple multiculturalist (for want of a better word) agendas seek to appropriate the new social subjects to provide them with prescribed representation thus only maintaining the status quo. The new political however can only emerge through new forms of cultural and social autonomy and by definition new social ecologies. How the new social ecologies emerge rely vitally on the accumulated pebbles and crumbs cast in the neoliberal landscape; their visibility may be barely legible but by their being, they mark the paths to the coming formations.

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