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Traveling Through the Inner City: form follows fiction

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Restructuring the inner city space according to the requirements of economic and administrative planning already proved to be an urban planning problem field with wide ranging sociocultural implications in the 70s. The structural change of the inner cities from living space to shopping and experience space developed a dynamic at this time, as endeavors were undertaken to at least partially bring the more prosperous classes from the suburban periphery back to the inner city area by clustering retail industry and trade. The transformation of the inner city to an entrepreneurially conceptioned "City" thus initiated resulted in new ways of using and appropriating public space. Now the City was to fulfill the profile of an urban world of experience without dangers according to the idea of retail trade and its customers (as in Klaus Ronneberger's book "Stadt als Beute" ["City as Booty"] published in 1999). "Corporative control systems" emerge, which judge issues of social inclusion and exclusion according to private business interests. The transformation of public space into a space of control is supported by communal politics. Political rhetoric is

currently reinforcing this tendency to reformulate questions of social justice as questions of internal security.

The 2001 Hamburg election campaigns focused public attention politically and in the media on the allegedly irritated "subjective feeling of security". The attempts made by all parties to "take people's fears seriously" led to a diagnosis of a desolate security situation and resulted in the Social-Democratic/Green senate being replaced by a coalition of the conservative CDU with the bourgeois-populist Constitutional State Offensive Party (Partei Rechtsstaatlicher Offensive - PRO). Since taking office as interior senator, the PRO chairman Ronald B. Schill has uncompromisingly impelled the exclusion of marginalized social groups from the inner city area, taking disproportionate action against certain forms of collective political articulation, which reached a preliminary climax with the violent suppression of a demonstration of school students against the Iraq war in late March. Months of protests following the eviction of the caravan site Bambule in Fall 2002 can be interpreted as an indication of the anger over the curtailment of fundamental civil rights by a disproportionately large police presence. For this reason, not least of all, the focus of the demonstrations quickly shifted from reservations about the rigorous expulsion of alternative forms of living from the city center to a protest against the paranoid vehemence of law and order policies. While the need for political articulation grew, the senate decreed a demonstration prohibition during the time before Christmas in the inner city shopping areas.

In addition to the restructuring of public space oriented to security discourses, the competition for growth and prosperity in comparison with other cities drove urban planning policies to elaborate interventions in the existing urban space. To achieve a greater proximity to a diffuse concept of "attractiveness" for certain

target groups (primarily internationally operating investor groups and global service industries), there is an emphasis on "soft" location factors that fulfill representative purposes.

In Hamburg, Mayor Klaus von Dohnanyi formulated the guiding motif for the "Hamburg enterprise" to create the preconditions for the location of branches "with a promising future" in Hamburg as early as 1983. This already included an explicit call for the adaptation of the residential and leisure situation to the tastes of the "creators of new industries and services". Dohnanyi's successor Henning Hoscherau presented the Harbor City in 1997, one of the largest urban planning projects in Europe. On the abandoned grounds of the Hamburg free port near the inner city, a symbiosis of event culture, service industry, lifestyle retail and a private university for new media was to result in the model inner city of the 21st century. The Harbor City - if it should still be realized to the planned extent following the change of government, the crisis of the New Market and Hamburg's failed application for the Olympic Games - will expand the current city center by nearly 50%.

Starting from a criticism of the concept of the city as a space of representation and the dominance of the needs of retail and trade over those of the residents of the city, the group Park Fiction developed an alternative form of resistive urbanism, which represents a qualitative break with conventional policy models. Since 1994 the initiative for the collective planning of a park in the city district of St. Pauli has been operating at the intersection of art, politics and social movements. In reference to the philosophy of Henri Lefèbvre, Park Fiction interprets the heterogeneity of cities and their "creative surplus" as a source for the revolutionary transformation of society. The planning concept of "collective wish production" (Czenki/Schäfer) attributes a central position to the

area of the private sphere and everyday life. Beyond the rejection of institutional urban planning, Park Fiction emphasizes the potentiality of self-determined and subjective designs of an urban society.

Not leaving the power of definition and action over urban space solely to the municipal administration is the theme of a number of artistic-political groups in Hamburg. What they have in common, in the sense of "constitutive practices" (Czenki/Schäfer), is not persisting in the negativity of oppositional protest, but rather proposing sustainable alternative realities and definitions of city from the conjunction of art and politics. The examples of a critical and experimental urbanist praxis in Hamburg range from the actual reappropriation of urban space by groups such as Ligna and Schwabinggrad Ballett, criticism of the dominant systems of describing reality by Blinde Passagiere, to the establishment of self-determined, collective planning processes with Park Fiction.

Ligna, a Hamburg radio collective, has been pursuing a participative concept of radio since 1996 with its music programs on the independent radio broadcaster FSK (Freies Sender Kombinat). Since last year, Ligna has expanded the collective framework of its work to interventions in public or semi-public spaces like the train station and the inner city, in order to question the "corporative control systems" that predominate there. With these interventions Ligna calls the predominant mechanisms of exclusion into question by applying strategies that are considered permissible in the respective normalization context. Thus, in the example of the "radio demo", for instance, the organized dispersal of a group of people in the inner city is formally not an "assembly" that could be countered with the temporary prohibition on demonstrations.

Similar to Ligna, the Schwabinggrad Ballett chooses forms for its appearances in public space that purport to accept existing limitations and prohibitions. The performative act - costumes, instruments, music, singing - is filled with political content and employed as a "Trojan horse" to temporarily disrupt the accustomed manner of dealing with political articulation. The parade for German retail trade that was conducted to circumvent the demonstration prohibition, for example, was able to appeal to the legal regulations for street music and distribute "20 Euro bills" printed with political slogans for an hour without harassment. This expansion of the classical repertoire of forms of political articulation is a non-confrontative way of addressing the Hamburg public, which has received images of political dispute over the past six months that have been almost exclusively dominated by (police) violence in conjunction with the Bambule protests.

The formation of the city as a control space in a very specific Hamburg context is the issue addressed by the group Blinde Passagiere ("stowaways"). Nightly harbor tours address on site the way the authorities deal with illegal immigrants who reach Hamburg by sea, a problem that is hardly registered by the public. In addition to this information strategy, by occupying freighters activists from the group have won the possibility for stowaways to go on land - the precondition for applying for asylum. The plans for the Harbor City already have a decisive impact on the flight conditions for immigrants, since the paths between the docks and the harbor police building have been shortened. The Blinde Passagiere intervene in realities that the authorities and the police seek to cover up.

Exploratory strategies - such as the project "Biological Research Station Alster" of the Gallery of Landscape Art in collaboration with the artist Mark Dion - are also designed to convey the urban

fabric beyond conventional use. The research station installed on a boat docks at two exemplary locations along the banks of the Alster in the city center of Hamburg to explore various functions of the course of the Alster and discuss the understanding of nature in the city. Set up as a laboratory, the research station makes it possible for diverse user groups to subjectively appropriate urban space using artistic, scientific and ecological techniques.

A comprehensive experiment in the global exchange of local knowledge will shortly be undertaken by the congress Park Fiction Presents: Unlikely Encounters (in Urban Space), initiated by the group Park Fiction and situated at the location of the creation of the project in St. Pauli. The congress is supported by the widely branching network of artists, musicians, social and political groups, which have been part of the collective planning process in this city district for years. A large part of the congress will therefore take place in the squatted houses in the Harbor Street, the Buttclub, the St. Pauli church, the Golden Pudel Klub, the GWA district cultural center, the school and the Rote Flora.

The declared aim of "Unlikely Encounters" is to enable the local culture of the city district to have "unlikely encounters" with the international participants in the congress. In addition to the aforementioned Hamburg groups, international collectives are invited, whose explicit space-appropriating work can be understood as a "constitutive praxis". In their respective countries of origin, they develop new forms of political organization under (sometimes extreme) conditions of repression and put them into practice using interdisciplinary means.

In addition to the formulation of their "Urban Studies" urbanist theory, Sarai from Delhi/India operate media and experimental laboratories at the peripheries of the uncontrollably growing

metropolises. There, residents are supported in the appropriation of territory threatened by demolition. Representatives from Maclovio Rojas near Tijuana/Mexico present their commune at the congress, a self-organized city that has been able to maintain itself as an autonomous form of organization against strong pressure from the government, with the help of a clever policy of networking with activists and art projects. Ala Plastica from La Plata/Argentina works on the linking of ecological, social and artistic methods for reconstructing public space in La Plata and for intervening in endangered ecosystems in the region. Cantieri Isola & office for urban transformation from Milan/Italy have developed an artistic praxis from an interdisciplinary action basis against the destruction of the Isola Quarter due to a major urban building project.

In light of the extremely different political starting point conditions, one fundamental question of the congress seems to be how the specific praxes can be thought in conjunction with one another despite the differences, without falling into an unsuitable relativization. For example, the concrete threat in Maclovio Rojas of exile, persecution and imprisonment can certainly not be put on a parallel with the political situation in Hamburg at a concrete level. For this reason, the structural embedding of local approaches in a critique of global conditions that is integral to Unlikely Encounters is a precondition for engaging in productive exchange. If it is possible to define the targets of the praxis in Hamburg as symptoms of a system that is rooted in a globalizing form of society, then it could also be possible to root resistance against these systems in a global frame of reference.

The reflection on our own respective methods and observations of the urban against the background of a global horizon that is to be developed promises fruitful impulses for our own praxis. In

addition, international networking has a pragmatic function that is not to be underestimated. The strategy of creating concrete protection for one's own work through international attention has already been successfully employed by some of the invited groups. However, it is also very important for the Hamburg groups and the host project to achieve mobilizing moments for the city district with a transregional public. The exhibition of the Documenta 11 installation by Park Fiction that frames the congress already brings international reception in art discourse to St. Pauli; the congress itself will add an explicitly political dimension through the exchange of methods. Finally, the selection of the international groups concretizes the "threat of realization" that Park Fiction poses in such a way that city politics here must recognize that the "fiction" is still far from being fulfilled, even when the park is finished.