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*URBAN IMAGING SYSTEMS:
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PROVINCIALIZING BERLIN: THE CITY'S WHISPERS—A CLOSE READING OF URBAN TEXTURES

1. PERSPECTIVE

Anyone born in West Berlin in the mid-1960s, and growing up in one of the border districts such as Kreuzberg, will be familiar with this peculiar pride in “unprettiness” and brokenness. The pleasure in the city’s raggedness existed long before ruins, creativity, and poverty were marketed as Berlin’s assets. The city was quite in accord with the encircling wall, its firewalls, and derelict buildings. Everything was conceivably unspectacular, mundane, sort of self-evident, and yet permeated with the awareness that one was actually living in an extraordinary, abnormal city. Over the years and decades, the historically charged cityscape of Berlin became part of the official narrative. Curiously, neither slickness nor nonchalance ever really set in. Shortly after the turn of the millennium, an artist on her first visit from Chile to Berlin remarked, “Every step weighs a ton,” while an Argentinian memory scientist complained that one couldn’t even go to the opera without stumbling across another commemorative plaque.

For a Berliner with a slight inclination towards urban drama, and also for an urban researcher who does not focus on the built form but on the spaces *between* the city’s houses, Daniel Young and Christian Giroux’s work is somewhat provocative.

2. ANTI-MAPPING AS A FORM OF READING THE CITY

The two Canadian artists defined two segments of time in the city's development, which they juxtaposed in an elaborate procedure. The precise pairing resulted in a stream of over 1,500 building portraits, recorded in a process of combing through the entire expanse of Berlin, while operating with a single but relentlessly applied rule—the documentation of every single building completed in 2013 and all the buildings in its direct vicinity constructed about thirty years earlier. The two chosen years of reference are distinctly unspectacular: 1983 as a year in which the city was still firmly anchored in its division, and 2013 as the status quo of the already newly formatted city.

The artists' systematic *scanning* of the city, from northwest to southeast and in a procedure resembling the back and forth of an inkjet printer, has resulted in a literal screening, a sort of automatized recording of the existing city. This renders a material texture which one would probably only rarely, or perhaps never, set eyes on in this manner—beyond all representational aspiration or otherwise transfiguring curative intervention. Daniel Young and Christian Giroux's focus is quite "simply" set on constructions completed around 1983 and in 2013, accurately centred, unpretentiously photographed, framed only by occasional greenery or garbage cans, fences or parked cars. Any other sideshow is omitted, i.e., precisely that exterior space, those public *spaces of uncertainty*,¹ where for someone like me the city begins to exist in the first place. However, there is an interestingly fictional in-between space that ensues from these pairings. Urban geography, as we know or imagine it, is taken apart and reassembled, establishing a new, unfamiliar spatiality: a kind of anti-mapping, readable as an effect of urban distantiation.

No less bewildering is that the juxtaposition of these buildings at first, somehow, suggests a contrast of then-and-now, which very soon dissolves upon closer observation: Without the knowledge of the building on the left always being new and the one on

the right newly constructed about thirty years earlier, one would hardly recognize it. Presupposed lines of differentiation, chronologies, and also dichotomies between now and the 1980s are undermined, and also, not infrequently, the imaginary differentiation between East and West Berlin. Instead, the flood of images and buildings expose urban patterns without any recognizable linear logic, array, or inventory of architectural form, format, and function. In Berlin, so the Canadians tell us, everything coexists across time.

At first, one is rather sceptical and slightly appalled by this excessively conventional assembly of all those pointed roofs, brick walls, and wooden houses; the incredible fence designs: that's supposed to be *Berlin*? Gradually the shudders and latent indignation fade away. This is clearly not about taste or the glaring lack of it, nor is it about architectural culture, it is not even about structure. Instead, it is actually about form, morphology, and something like urban (in)coherence.

The perspective and narrative angle is decentralized, you could also say: decolonized. Lifted from the linearity of the mega-narratives that usually structure our perception: (architectural) history, geography, geopolitics, as well as (the architecture of) modernism. When scanning the Canadian landscape for *Infrastructure Canada*, an earlier project that used motion picture film to investigate space, the artists explicitly took an anti-architectural approach: seeking out seriality rather than linearity, tracing out recurrences and patterns, in this case expanded horizontally. They put their focus on the reshaped and reformatted landscape, beyond the opposed geographical narratives of organic wilderness versus its domestication by artificial means, to reveal the hybrid figure of the net, of interconnectedness.

This mode of exposure and visualization of net-like forms, which lie right before our eyes and yet out of our sight and out of our urban *imaginarios*, as these collectively forged imagery complexes are termed in Latin-American urban anthropology,² reveals what it is that “holds together” or even “constitutes” geographical or urban spaces, even though it never coherently

comes into view. Here it does: not as a totality or essence, always recognizable as one of many possible urban storylines.

3. NORMALIZATION: TEXTURE VERSUS NARRATIVE

One would expect that (geo-)political temporality would inscribe itself more or less directly into built structures, manifesting the differences between East and West, the time of the wall, and after the wall. However, what actually comes to view in this assembly of images undermines Berlin's popular narratives, from the grandiose reborn capital through the creative city to the liberal-minded cosmopolis. It doesn't really fit into the Berlin imaginary that serves as the backdrop for my own research on the spectres of violence that still haunt the city today. Berlin, in this reading, is a kind of open surface for the inscriptions of twentieth-century violence, repeatedly reformatted through "automatic urbanism":³ its voids and "spaces of uncertainty" torn between urban policies and architectural ideologies, its abundance of history, and at the same time its inclination to erase historical markers, its oft-admired vastness and taciturnity⁴ as well as the increasing tendency to fill up all the empty spaces with buildings.

Not that these are mere illusions; evidence is omnipresent. However, what one encounters in Daniel Young and Christian Giroux's work constitutes a productive shock: Berlin is to some extent normalized. The exceptional city becomes an *ordinary city*—a term originally coined in the context of postcolonial urban studies against the all-too-simplifying discourses on megacities and *global cities*. All cities can (also) be described and understood as *ordinary cities*, and that is exactly what happens here with Berlin: the German capital becomes something provincial, suburban, utterly undramatic. Berlin doesn't appear as eccentric or broken, but as a rather sedate and at times banal-seeming city, from which all drama and hipness has been exorcized.

Since the self-imposed rule of the work result in the periphery taking up considerably more space and time than the more-

familiar city centre, the feeling of *we are in Berlin* hardly ever sets in. One rarely, if ever, sees wasteland, relics of the former wall or vacant lots; instead there is a quite unexpected number of terrace or row houses and single-family homes. Plenty of grey in oh-so-colourful Berlin, and evidently, surprisingly little was built on the waterside; all in all, a collection of small-scale lower- and middle-class dwellings, not only lacking in elegance but also without any pomposity. Suburbia shifts into the spotlight and defeats the centre; a real extent prevails over density; the peripheral becomes the dominating texture. The broad expanse of Berlin becomes visible: something we already knew, but hadn't seen.

After all, this seemingly random juxtaposition is connected to Berlin's particular "formlessness": the permanent reformatting tends to generate amalgams, a penchant for fakes and architectural simulation, as well as to regression, and not least, a pressure to legitimize new buildings "historically." There is no such thing like urban innocence; the ground remains an ideological minefield. Many of the buildings shown here seem to counter these constraints with their ornamental logics and a certain dullness, with an almost amiable obstinacy, which resists the lure of fashion (which in itself is a particular Berlin trait).

The congenial aspect in the Canadian artists' work is their lack of condescension or even satisfaction. Using a sober and systematic approach that avoids aestheticizing at all costs, they seek a visual strategy that is able to defy Berlin's renowned and unquestionable charm. However, there is an air of tenderness in the way they look at the city; their scanning seems to lay it bare, revealing its nakedness as it is stripped of its decorous narrative, while preserving its dignity. Every now and again they even capture architectural gems, truly charming houses, as elegant as they are original. Once you are drawn in by the slow flow of images, you cannot avoid the strange impression that you are dealing with almost organic creatures, with personalities.

4. SIMULTANEITY

The figure of an *urban palimpsest*⁵ refers to urban layers that are superimposed, although the underlying layers cannot really be overwritten by subsequent ones, but they always shine through or can be revealed, to stay in the palimpsest metaphor, through “chemical processes.” As in this case, for example, through visual arts, film, or photography.

Generally, this refers to the superimposition or overlapping of material layers in one place. In this vein, Tobias Engelschall’s publication *Zustände* reconstructs the transformation of one hundred buildings in Berlin, exposing the layers of time embedded in them.⁶ It reveals the palimpsest-like quality of urban architecture, an ongoing superimposing and cross-fading of forms and formats. Again, there are no clear temporal boundaries of before and after, no linear history of destruction and loss. Instead, what is exposed here is transition and organic growth, material durability and mutability. Although there is some evidence of architectural violence, gentrification, or regression, one can also find more subtle assemblages, camouflage, and reassignment, seldom explicit eradication.

Viewing Engelschall’s montages of architectural conditions reminds me of a question underlying my own research on the transformation of sites of terror or crime scenes into memorials or even everyday spaces: the question of the resilience of materiality that might resist an all-too-smooth repurposing and recoding, be it architecturally or politically motivated. In some of the “transformed” buildings it seems as though one can see, quite literally, how one form slips over to the next: a kind of reappearance or reincarnation, or less esoterically, using a term preferred by Engelschall himself: material cycles. Houses are seen here as “hybrid beings” which unite various materials or types within themselves. As is the case, for example, where a German air force general had Arnold Zweig’s studio house converted for himself in the late 1930s, and the flat roof rose to become a flat pitched roof. Nevertheless, the general’s home did

not succeed in completely erasing the writer's modernism, which is still visible in the building's clear-cut outline.

The palimpsest is founded on the notion of spatial intertextuality: everything in our built environment inevitably relates to other buildings, architectural discourses, urban as well as political constellations. This insistence on a discursive interconnectedness, and therefore historicity, prevents any essentialist reductions. Young and Giroux take a similar approach. In their work; this palimpsest quality becomes evident more through coexisting and juxtaposition rather than overlapping and layering, a simultaneity that tends to undermine linear and binary classification. One could describe what comes to light as the "co-presence" of urbanity, to paraphrase Erving Goffman, the co-existence and, in a sense, interaction of various time periods and styles. Fortunately, this is far removed from an ahistorical *anything goes*. The temporality of the selected spotlights is ever present, especially in what does not come to light. Had the artists chosen a time segment two or three years later, container villages and "modular refugee accommodation" would probably have appeared as part of the new architectural Berlin landscape.

Speaking of time: a lovely side effect lies in the temporality of seasons and times of day inscribed in the images. The photographs were taken over the course of three months. The visible shift from bleak grey to sprouting green and of different times of day have not always been edited chronologically, instead they jump beautifully back and forth, here and there. This undermines the rigorous visual study's austerity, preserving it from being sterile, while revealing what research always is and will always be: a process subjected to wind and weather.

5. BEYOND LOOKING

This work demonstrates once more that image production is a most productive mode of exploring urban and spatial constellations; a kind of archaeology of contemporaneity, the retrieval and juxtaposition of layers, which do not exactly require

excavation, but are nevertheless initially invisible. A visual knowledge is generated that is able to counter the currents of dis-course, and that can thwart the stated, the imagined and supposedly known. It is also a form of knowledge that stems against the currents of daily urban life, that unceasing hustle and bustle of the city and its constant tendency to forget, not only of the past but also of that which surrounds us day by day, this “floating indifference” that, according to Isaac Joseph, constitutes the very substance of urbanity.⁷

Berlin 2013/1983 subjects the images to their own flow, and makes considerable demands on its viewers: seven hundred and fifty pairs of buildings roll by in five-second sequences in the space of almost two hours of film, flooding our *imaginarios* of the (or our) city. No pauses are provided, the video’s frame rate of one per second, as opposed to the usual twenty-four that enables the human eye to perceive continuous movement, generates a fluttering, a kind of visual breathlessness. We are forced to look in a manner we would probably not voluntarily look: visual excess, quite the opposite of a flaneur’s eye.

With time, the viewing becomes more fluent, ultimately lingering; one is distracted and drawn back in. One finds oneself leafing through one’s own visual archives and one starts questioning things: What *exactly* is it that makes me recognize the former East Berlin or the south of the city? Who is really responsible for the way the city looks in all the individual components exposed here? Are there limits to what you are allowed to do behind the garden fence, where does privacy intrude into public urban space? And finally, to whom does all this belong? What do all these different “new” houses say about Berlin as a city whose inhabitants are predominantly tenants and not homeowners—is it possible to tell from just looking whether the houses are rented or possessed? And what kind of neighbourhood—as opposed to “community”—exists between these houses, conceived of as genuine urban interaction between people who are spatially but not necessarily socially affiliated?

Of course, Berlin is not its houses. However, what this screening exposes is something akin to the city's material culture, as a matrix for urbanity. It proposes a method for a reading of urban textures, and although it may not have been intended as urban research, it would certainly be worth patenting it as an urban research method: in order to trace the materiality of *urban landscapes*, particularly of all those exceptional cities so overgrown with images and narratives that we can no longer see or grasp them. It represents an approach that allows urbanity to materialize, without demonizing or romanticizing it. Visual research of this kind can also be understood as a “discursive exercise,” as curator Jonathan Shaughnessy puts it in his essay about *Infrastructure Canada*.⁸ Clearly not to force what is shown into existing systems or typologies, but rather to facilitate the emergence of a new grammar that enables our built environment to speak, or at least to whisper, in new and unexpected manners.

- 1 Kenny Cupers and Markus Miessen, *Spaces of Uncertainty* (Wuppertal: Müller + Busmann, 2002).
- 2 Anne Huffschmid and Kathrin Wildner, *Stadtforschung aus Lateinamerika. Neue urbane Szenarien: Öffentlichkeit, Territorialität, Imaginarios* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013). See also Anne Huffschmid, “From the City to lo Urbano: Exploring Cultural Production of Public Space in Latin America,” *Iberoamericana*, no. 12 (2012), http://www.iai.spk-berlin.de/fileadmin/dokumentenbibliothek/Iberoamericana/45-2012/45_Huffschmid.pdf.
- 3 Philipp Oswalt, *Berlin Stadt ohne Form—Strategien einer ande#dt* (Munich: Prestel, 2000).
- 4 For instance, Mexican writer Carmen Boulosa expressed her enthusiasm about the Berlin “silence” in her fabulous essay about the two “invisible cities,” Mexico City and Berlin. See Carmen Boulosa, “México-Berlín, Berlín-México,” in *Das Eigene im Anderen, Das Andere im Eigenen*, ed. Adrián Bodek and Ulrich Wüst (Mexico City: Centro de la Imagen, 1997).
- 5 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).
- 6 Tobias Engelschall, *Zustände: Eine Topographie architektonischer Transformationen in Berlin* (Berlin: Bom Dia Boa Tarde Boa Noite, 2015).
- 7 Isaac Joseph, *El transeúnte y el espacio urbano: Ensayo sobre la dispersión del espacio público* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2002).
- 8 Christian Giroux and Daniel Young, *Infrastructure Canada* (Oakville: Oakville Galleries, 2016).