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Approaching the 3S – the Spatial, the Social, and the Sensorium

An International Autumn School on the Materiality of Cultural Practices in Social Space

Artistic and cultural practices, be they performance art, visual art or mundane practices like visiting a museum or attending a cultural event, always take place in specific social contexts and in specific spatial arrangements. The material qualities of these practices provide the basis for perception and the ascription of meaning: what can be seen, heard, felt, smelled etc. is individually processed and interpreted, while historically settled socio-cultural conventions heavily influence these processes. Artistic and cultural practices are also modes of appropriating space, thus producing different spaces (public, private, collective etc.) and shaping tangible places.

In a series of lectures and workshops, these issues were tackled at the Department of Sculpture and Space at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, in October 2016. International artists, researchers and scholars from a wide range of professions and academic disciplines gathered for a week to reflect on the theoretical input offered by the speakers and to work on concrete case studies. The Autumn School, organized by Eva Kernbauer, Luise Reitstätter and Hans Schabus, also allowed for consultations with the speakers in order to discuss specific questions concerning individual artistic or research projects.

Starting on Monday, Hans Schabus, artist and head of the Department Sculpture and Space, gave an example of space-shaping in a rural context. In his project *Lassnitz* (2012) he had a disused 1930s railway bridge from Austria transferred to a land art park in Germany. Thus, he transformed a former object of utility into an art object, while at the same time referencing a nostalgic narrative of the steel industry and working class pride. In his workshop, Schabus sent the participants out to explore the neighborhood of the venue (Paulusplatz in Vienna's third district) and to collect material for a collectively produced sculpture. While the artistic quality of this work was intensely discussed, the field trip also allowed the participants to get a sense of place and explore nearby spaces of transformation (the so-called *Neu Marx*).

On the next day, Volker Kirchberg, professor of the Sociology of the Arts at Leuphana University in Lüneburg, shifted the focus of attention to museums. He discussed the potential benefits of museums for societies, for example, their function as mediators for antagonistic groups or as spaces for civil activism. Kirchberg sketched out a museum typology ranging from the responsive to, among others, the inclusive and the contesting museum. He didn't stick to theoretical concepts but had the participants work on a specific case, illustrating the complex of social actors, public authorities, historical settings and questions of funding that museums as social institutions are confronted with.

On Wednesday, architect Jakub Szczesny suggested adding a fourth ‚S' to the Spatial, the Social and the Sensorium, which he named the Symbolic. Drawing on several recent examples in Poland, he illustrated how public spaces turn into ideological battlegrounds of symbolic representation. One example was a rainbow sculpture by Julita Wojcik on Plac Zbawiciela (Redemptor Square) in Warsaw (2013).

After being criticized as a symbol for homosexuality (unlike how it was intended by the artist), the rainbow was set on fire several times before being burnt down altogether. In Szczesny's workshop, the participants were given a playful exercise in "engineered history": they were to symbolically reframe existing public works of art or other public spaces with the aim of producing new counter-narratives.

Elisabeth Oberzaucher, a (human) biologist, closed the lecture series on Thursday with her talk on the "urban human." She introduced the participants to a number of concepts from biology, providing a basis for understanding human behavior in urban spaces. For example, human territoriality as well as the concept of personal space (the distance people usually keep between one another) heavily influence social interaction in public spaces. Oberzaucher also discussed the notions of "biophilia" and "phytophilia," which refer to the fact that such things as water or plants are perceived as beautiful by humans and positively influence processes of cognition. She linked these references to questions of urban design in her workshop. Drawing on a housing complex from Vienna's much praised 1920s public housing program, she illustrated the need to design public spaces so as to meet human landscape preferences and invite social interaction.

Finally, an all-day workshop on *Re-Mediating Cinematic Experience* (organized by Kristina Pia Hofer, Eva Kernbauer and Marietta Kesting) took place on Friday within the research project *A Matter of Historicity*, focusing on the event character of cinema. Giuliana Bruno, Professor of Visual and Environmental Studies, Harvard University, gave a lecture on the often-neglected material dimension of cinema, its surfaces and screens of projection throughout history. Erica Balsom, Senior Lecturer in Film Studies and Liberal Arts, King's College, London, discussed the implications of the "liveness" and irreproducibility of a cinematic event. Volker Pantenburg, Professor of Film Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, explored questions of analogue and digital film formats in museums and gallery spaces. The Autumn School closed with a performance by the Danish art collective Vinylterrorandhorror (Camilla Soerensen and Greta Christensen), playing, breaking and re-assembling bits and pieces of LP records – and thus allowing the audience to almost painfully experience the materiality of music and performance art.

Program of the Autumn School, general information and blog entries:
www.skulpturundraum.at/autumn-school.html

www.amatterofhistoricity.net/workshop-2/

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