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MOMENTARY MONUMENTS

HAPPY ENDING

When an exhibition is no longer simply identical with the sum of its exhibits, but presents itself instead as an action that succeeds in opening up a space, then it becomes a spatio-temporal constellation, a social event. 'Relational aesthetics'¹ can be imagined this way, and the architecture of an exhibition can be seen as an example of a work in time. Not only because procedures become more important than objects, but above all because only an experience of space through time leads to a concept of relational architecture – the focus of attention is shifted away from the inherent qualities of the buildings themselves onto their potential relations to the social sphere within which architecture is created and used.

A PIECE OF REALITY

Together with the German and Turkish residents of a housing project in Kassel, Thomas Hirschhorn built, operated, and dismantled the Bataille Monument for Documenta 11. 'Georges Bataille had nothing to do with Kassel: the Bataille Monument is not a contextual work.'² The contextualization takes place on the level of usage, which is created by the subdivision of the monument into eight equally important elements: shuttle service, library, exhibition, snog bar, TV studio, workshop, webcams, sculpture. Hirschhorn was present for the entire duration of the monument and lived in the housing project. At the end he said: 'Work in public space is never a total success and never a total failure. Instead it is about an experience, about exposing oneself, about enduring and creating an experience.'³ Usage of the monument begins when the visitor gets into the old Mercedes providing the shuttle service from the main exhibition at the Binding Brauerei and ends with a return to this point of departure. In direct and unsentimental fashion, the city becomes part of an experience of synchronicity: the Bataille Monument is on show in an exhibition while also taking place in a local housing project.

1 NICOLAS BOURRIAUD, ESTHÉTIQUE RELATIONELLE, LES PRESSES DU RÉEL 1998

2 THOMAS HIRSCHHORN, BATAILLE MONUMENT, IN: CLAIRE DOHERTY (ED.), FROM STUDIO TO SITUATION, LONDON 2004

3 IBID.

'BIG IS NOT MONUMENTAL.

Nor is bigger.'⁴ And conversely, monumental does not mean big. Architecture's weakness for the large and the lasting may lead to colossal buildings, but not necessarily to monuments. The monumental is more a form of time in space that begins with the ephemeral – the consolidation of celebrations in festive architecture; the theatricality of the procession through to its perpetuation in the monument. Gottfried Semper's observation of this transfer, in which ritual movement in space is transformed into lightweight paraphernalia or tectonic form, shows how time can be materialized as architecture.⁵ Monumentality is not about the scale and permanence of architecture, but about its fidelity to the events from which it emerges.

HIGH AND LOW

Ephemera, processions and street theater express social form in very direct and non-elitist terms. Modernism's stated aim of achieving social continuity through egalitarian design with the aesthetic standards of an elite, on the other hand, proved impossible to achieve in this form. For today's reader, Jacob Burckhardt's rehabilitation of popular arts such as architectural decoration in the Renaissance reads like a modern auto-reflection on the way social praxis becomes form in terms of realism. Such an approach only reappeared in the 1950s with the Situationists' explorations of the city.⁶ The exhibitions of the London-based Independent Group, and especially the contributions by the Smithsons, are marked by a continuation of this modern auto-reflection. Perhaps the Smithsons' 1968 intervention at Giancarlo De Carlo's Milan Triennale should also be seen in this context: ephemeral city decoration as a response to the exhibition's theme: forms of expression in mass society.

4 FRIEDRICH ACHLEITNER, DAS KLEINSTE MONUMENT ODER APHORISTISCHES ZUM MONUMENTALISMUS, IN: SCHNEIDER / WANG (EDS.); MODERNE ARCHITEKTUR IN DEUTSCHLAND 1900-2000, OSTFILDERN 1998

5 FRITZ NEUMEYER, FESTLICHKEIT UND FESTIGKEIT, IN: JOSEF IMORDE (ED.), BAROCKE INSZENIERUNG, ZÜRICH 1999

6 JACOB BURCKHARDT, THE CIVILIZATION OF THE RENAISSANCE IN ITALY, LONDON 1990

MODERN MONUMENT?

Around 1944, a discontent with Modernism's disturbed relationship to monuments prompted Giedion together with his coauthors Léger and Sert, to formulate a nine-point program for a 'new monumentality'. This endeavor appears as a turning point, the end of a period that began in 1918 with a demonstrative rejection of everything monumental, as typified by the transition from Peter Behrens' prewar work to his statement in 1920: 'Monumental art, aesthetic imperialism!' Aware of the crisis brewing within CIAM, Giedion went in search of repressed themes of Modernism and claimed to have found cores of spirituality within society that called out for special architectural expression. Rather than being the manifesto of a new beginning, this document of a crisis succumbs instead to the temptation of equating the monumental with the symbolic. Freed of its essentialist pathos, however, Giedion's search would come close to Lefebvre's materialist definition: 'The monument is the only place in the life of a society that can be imagined. It dominates, but it does so in order to bring together.'⁸

NEW MONUMENTS

'Along the Passaic River there were many minor monuments such as concrete abutments that supported the shoulders of a new highway in the process of being built.'⁹ Robert Smithson takes a bus ride through New Jersey and encounters a landscape of 'ruins in reverse', structures that rise up as ruins before they are built. The new conceptual monuments that Smithson makes real are anti-romantic tableaux of an objective present, and they reserve no place for before or after. It is not about ritual or exaltation, but purely about these artifacts' presence in the perception of the passing traveler. The new monuments are the result of a productive gaze that makes reality into a direct function of subjective sensibility. With hindsight, it is now clear that the touristic gaze has become a determining function in perceptions of our own identities.¹⁰

7 SIEGFRIED GIEDION, FERNAND LÉGER, JOSÉ LUIS SERT, NINE POINTS ON MONUMENTALITY, NEW YORK 1943

8 HENRI LEFEBVRE, LA REVOLUTION URBAINE, PARIS 1970

9 ROBERT SMITHSON, A TOUR OF THE MONUMENTS OF PASSAIC, NEW JERSEY, IN: FLAM (ED.), ROBERT SMITHSON THE COLLECTED WRITINGS, BERKELEY 1996

10 BORIS GROYS, LOGIK DER SAMMLUNG, MUNICH 1997

SITUATIONS

'A situation is the beginning of a critical phase of actualization, the uncertainty of time. From minute to minute, new facts are reported, the picture changes so fundamentally that one asks oneself if one is still looking in the same direction.'¹¹ Within its roots in the military, a situation is a moment in the field when changes take place that are perceived and interpreted but which also includes the viewer's own position. This undistanced distance contrasts with the panoramic view from a hilltop command point that formed the basis for Le Corbusier's 'Plan Voisin', and which was capable of seeing a city like Paris as an accumulation of decontextualized historical monuments. In the mid-fifties, Debord and Jorn wandered through a Paris that they experienced in concrete spatio-temporal terms, street by street, without ever gaining an overview. Moving through the city, fragments of perception order themselves into 'Psychogeographies' that are subjective and momentary.

At the 1953 CIAM conference in Aix-en-Provence, Alison and Peter Smithson presented a tableau. It showed Le Corbusier's normative grid in altered form – instead of the four modern functions of habitation, work, leisure and transport, the terms house, street, and relationship appeared above photos by Nigel Henderson of children playing in the working-class district of Bethnal Green in London. The supposed clarity of modern city planning is replaced by a perception and presentation of situations in which space is not defined by planning but produced by the relations between the built environment and the way it is used. In a joint exhibition in 1956 entitled 'This is Tomorrow', the Smithsons and Henderson, together with Paolozzi, found a form through which to directly express this vision of inhabited space.¹² The exhibition appeared to feature an environment composed of objects, photos and collages. Actually on show was a temporal nexus, not as a linear sequence but as a network of relations, for example between architects and artists. This prototypical tension is amplified in acts of appropriation by visitors who are themselves integral components of the exhibition. In the constant flux of negotiations between planning and usage, it is a network which produces a space that adapts itself to the situation at hand.

11 ROBERTO OHRT, SITUATION – NACHZULESEN ZWISCHEN SITTE UND SKEPSIS, IN PHANTOM AVANTGARDE, HAMBURG 1990

12 IN 1956, THE LONDON-BASED INDEPENDENT GROUP ORGANIZED THE EXHIBITION 'THIS IS TOMORROW' AT THE WHITECHAPEL GALLERY. AS GROUP 6, THE SMITHSONS, HENDERSON AND PAOLOZZI CONTRIBUTED AN ENVIRONMENT ENTITLED 'PATIO AND PAVILION'.