

From:

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Space (Re)Solutions

Intervention and Research in Visual Culture

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The rapid changes currently taking place in our urban, political and institutional environments have shifted spatial practice to centre stage both in civic life and academic research. Social networking, political projects, cross-border movements, artistic interventions, urban and environmental initiatives, self-organized educational practices – all articulate the challenges involved in organizing the spaces we share.

In this volume, visual culture scholars from around the world discuss the »practical turn« in different fields of critical engagement, proposing fresh ways to assert an interpenetrated space of research and intervention.

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Motions

PETER MÖRTENBÖCK AND HELGE MOOSHAMMER

When we take a closer look at the mutability of discourses, institutional practices and research approaches today, two phenomena stand out in particular: on the one hand the rapid changes in thinking relating to how we encounter the subjects of our experiential world, and, on the other, the rapid change in the subjects themselves that constitute the substance of these encounters. Together these phenomena account for the shifts in cultural boundaries that guide what we do. They alter the focus of our attention and the manner in which we critically process our environment, relate it to our own interests and thereby make it a matter of concern.

For more than two decades the process of engaging with this continuous reconfiguration has been a central focus of the various strands of enquiry grouped around the concept of Visual Culture. This field of critical thinking is not tied to a particular subject or methodological canon, and in the course of its development it has drawn a range of academic discourses, artistic currents and emancipatory interests into its orbit. The insistence on boundaries as sites of engagement within the field of Visual Culture has made it possible to absorb a range of different voices into a discursive field conceived as a process of permanent change. This field repeatedly coalesces around new terrain precisely because it is founded not on a fixed subject of interrogation but on an orientation to prevailing boundaries whose exigencies provide a basis for the development of a critical discourse and the creation of possibilities of intervention.

A look back at the development of the discourse of Visual Culture reveals not only the diversity of interests directed at this field but also the degree to which what is regarded as a boundary in Visual Culture has changed over the last ten, twenty or twenty-five years. Whereas in the 1990s the issue was still one of crossing the disciplinary boundaries between art history, photography, new media, cultural anthropology and the burgeoning projects of Cultural Studies and Queer and Postcolonial Studies, this situation has now changed significantly. The central concepts of gaze, vision and visuality and their convergence in the context of practices of looking continue to

echo in the engagement with questions of technology, spectacle, surveillance, globalization and the role of art; but today the signs, institutions and subjects of visual culture are embedded in a growing complexity of geographies, apparatuses and participations. The geocultural instabilities of the present, political upheavals, worldwide economic crises, global migrations, technological changes, new forms of collective interaction and new forms of education mean that an improved instrument is required that can make sense of these developments and offer new perspectives. Some of the most important markers of the resonance of these changes in the discourse of visual culture are the incessant shifts of focus in Visual Culture as a field of study, the different reflections on the field's own journey in its attempts to narrate the history of Visual Culture, the various debates on the state of Visual Culture that have taken place in the *Journal of Visual Culture*,¹ perhaps the field's most notable journal, as well as recent initiatives within the academy that question the project of Visual Culture altogether vis-à-vis an enormous enthusiasm among new generations of researchers in different world regions and the current attempts to consolidate Visual Culture further through a global association of Visual Culture scholars.

However symptomatic these efforts may be, what has emerged over the last decade as one of the most enduring aspects of work in Visual Culture is a persistent desire for both a critical sensitivity toward its theoretical underpinnings and an experimental elasticity in its methodological approaches. Today, this drive is giving rise to a plethora of new investigative practices and multi-directional engagements, particularly with respect to matters of geopolitical urgency and their cultural and spatial implications. What has become evident in recent years, in particular, is that the established scenarios of visibility that we have been concerned with in Visual Culture over many years—the questions of who looks, who is being watched, who is part of a representation and who is given permission to voice their political concerns, etc—have turned into something far more volatile and unbounded: they have turned into radically new ways of being together, into new assemblages of people, apparatuses and governments, into new forms of global connectivities that demand a new relational sensibility based on spatial distribution rather than territorial belonging. Most importantly, we are now faced with a plethora of questions and demands that have to do with the changing realities we find ourselves immersed in, be it as academics, artists, writers, activists, or whatever role one may be willing to subscribe to.

An important question that arises from this increasing complexity of the cultural sphere is how to make this global change productive—how to deal with the erosion of numerous boundaries and with the ways in which we are now confronted with the manifestation of new and ever more sophisticated boundary and network structures. In other words, how to inhabit the current

1 See *Journal of Visual Culture* 2(1&2), April & August 2003, and 4(2), August 2005

cultural and political transformations both in terms of academic work and in terms of practice more generally. It is not by chance that practice has become such a buzz word in the academy and art education respectively. Practice has moved centre stage as an experimental mode of knowledge production, one that is often linked to an emerging research culture characterized by notions of collectivity, collaboration and intervention. Especially in recent years, these dynamics have brought to the fore a range of political and educational initiatives, transversal knowledge platforms, and activist networks that have begun to spearhead the debate about forms of critical engagement in processes of globalisation. As opposed to purely theoretical or conceptual speculation, practice seems to be much more attuned to the politics of intervention, and thus to hold the key to promoting unsolicited participations. Not least in light of this unruly potential for civic participation, it seems pertinent to call upon the rising interest in practical experimentation across a wide range of civic actors for in-depth reflections on acts of translation between the theoretical and the practical, artistic and pragmatic.

At the university and art academy level numerous practice-based Ph.D. programmes are now providing an important platform for this discussion, although they are more a symptom than the result of the changing relationship between theory and practice. These programmes clearly show how closely research and intervention parallel one another when we comprehend research not as a field of academic thought but as an open cultural practice and when we begin to plumb the different possibilities inherent in this practice. Probably one of the most significant potentials of this approach consists in the fluid transition from one practice to other practices and the associated contaminations and intertwinements between different spheres.

Such a focus on practice is therefore significant for Visual Culture research in several respects: one the one hand as a way of mobilizing contemporary critical discourse beyond the confines of disciplines and the separation of methods, roles and subjects they presuppose. However, on the other, this orientation to forms of practice also means that research interests are not only oriented to a structural analysis of the objective components of our experiential sphere but also to the question of what is being maintained and/or promoted by the institutions, discourses and actors under investigation, i.e. what type of practice the complex constellations of our environment themselves represent. Moreover, this orientation also entails not least a consideration of the potential of one's own practice with all its protocols, rules and procedures—of the significance of the prevailing tension between the abstraction and representation of research observations and one's own engagement in critical situations. Both tendencies—abstraction and intervention—work from different ends in the process of probing realities, of revealing aspects that are not part of our knowledge, that are possibly concealed or suppressed such that they do are not included in the scope of our claims and possibilities for action.

One radical point of departure of this type of practice-based research is thus the question of what it is that we do not know—the question of the apparatus we require to generate the knowledge that we have previously disregarded, either intentionally or unintentionally. This attitude not only assumes that parity of all knowledge in principle but also directs our attention to the actors involved and the factual environment in which these experiences can take place, i.e. the formation of conditions under which a certain type of material can be encountered and used. When, for example, the issue is one of learning experiences then the focus must be on the actual learning environment and the practice of learning rather than the transmission of knowledge from one person to another. The question of what knowledge can be produced is thus ultimately dependent on the spaces in which we deal with material, the relational structures we thereby enter into and the quality of our dialogues. Interventionist research therefore also entails the interrogation, manipulation and formation of the settings in which a certain question is pursued.

An important site of this critical engagement in the field of visual culture is constituted by the numerous approaches characterizing contemporary artistic practice with which collective processes of empowerment can be initiated in order to open up a new understanding of cultural participation. A parallel development can be observed in the recent emergence of many academic institutions, platforms and project groups devoted to the creation of new perspectives and new forms of practice in knowledge production around questions of social and spatial environments. Moreover, the many current aspirations detectable in the exhibition field, art pedagogy and practical processes of mediation to explore new ways of opening up, representing and communicating complex spatial and social processes also need to be seen as part of this development.

What we are aiming to trace through this volume of essays are the interactions of different forms of practice that critically address forces constitutive of our current moment: the coming together of phenomena such as border violations, wartime media coverage, circulation anxieties, live art events, counter-environments, dreaming economies, blogospheres, educational protest programmes and informal urbanism. All these phenomena have a critical impact on the ways we conceive and inhabit the spaces we share. They have themselves been affected by the different forces and movements that embrace, ignore or fight the growing instabilities of our urban, political and institutional fields. The restive dynamics of these phenomena are giving rise not least to an erratic concept of space itself—the space arising from the numerous theatres of war we are currently confronted with; the space traced by the labyrinthine routes of migrations; the all-encompassing phantasmagorical space of the War on Terror; but also the space of new collective experiences and transversal aggregations; the space of improvisation, invention and practical experimentation. Space is thereby shifting once again to the centre of engagement, a space whose authority

does not primarily emerge in the context of reflective observation but in the moment of emergence itself. What is at issue here is thus a probing of the contours of a space, contours that cannot be anticipated either with the instruments of a strategic practice or a practice-oriented strategy.

In the light of such dynamics, this book brings together researchers and practitioners whose work is deeply embedded in the turbulent enmeshment of emergent spatial phenomena and new modes of theoretical inquiry. The assertion in this context of a combined concept of intervention and research brings spatial practice—one of the three points in Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad—together with Michel Foucault's use of the concept of the *dispositif* (apparatus). In Lefebvre's words, spatial practice embodies »a close association [...] between daily reality (daily routine) and urban reality (the routes and networks which link up the places set aside for work, ›private' life and leisure)« (Lefebvre 1991: 38). As examples of his concept of spatial practice, Lefebvre points to the everyday experience of renters in tenements, life on motorways and the politics of air traffic. Here spatial practice entails the linkage of localities with routine processes. But what is missing here is a strategic logic concerned with power and knowledge. And it is precisely this logic that forms part of what Michel Foucault characterizes as *dispositif*. Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* comprises a network of heterogeneous elements that can be discourses but equally also institutions, architectures, laws, administrative procedures, scholarly statements or moral principles, in short the strategic composition of the mechanisms deployed in the constitution of subjectivity. The strategic function of the *dispositif* involves clearly calculated interventions in power relations in order to destabilize, utilize or further develop them (Foucault 1980: 194–196). Whereas competence in the field of spatial practice consists in abidance and the generation of consistency and continuity, the strengths of *dispositifs* lie in the aspiration to change. However, both concepts relate to a fundamental point around which their action potential coalesces: their logic is oriented to the principle of networks, the site of exchange, distribution and multiplications. It is founded on the morphological openness of networks, an aspect that is crucial to the spontaneous unfolding of social processes and that facilitates an ongoing transfer of dissident meanings and values in the sphere of political action in the shadow of all attempts at regulation.

This shared orientation of spatial practice and *dispositifs* makes it possible for us also to think agency independently of strategic aspiration, i.e. to see a form of activism also in the ramifications and resistances that spatial practice always entails and not only in the mobilization of this practice as concerted political action. Conversely, it becomes clear that a strategic endeavour around the production of knowledge does not necessarily need to have political dimensions that promote self-determined action. Such an endeavour can also aspire to protect dominant systems, establish internal homogeneities and ward off dissenting behaviour. Both strands thus offer neither stabilities nor guarantees but rather a degree of the unknown from

which something can emerge. It is the tension between the two logics, i.e. their fundamentally unpredictable interplay, which enables them to open up our knowledge to the uncertain. And it is through examining this tension that the essays in this volume hope to better grasp not only what kinds of spaces we collectively create, but also what the animating principles of the ever-changing field of Visual Culture are today and what they could be in the future.

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