

BOOKS

DID SOMEONE SAY PARTICIPATE? AN ATLAS OF SPATIAL PRACTICE

EDITED BY MARKUS MIESSEN AND SHUMON BASAR

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Did Someone Say Participate? This quirky, inquiring title cleverly prompts an immediate response from the reader. Beyond the cover an elegant tonal gradation of hue complements the primarily monochromatic and duo-toned midnight blue of the texts and images. Several exceptions in standard black text with full-spread color images are scattered throughout. Heavyweight matte paper contrasts with the shiny cover. Similar to a high school social studies textbook in appearance, the eye-catching wrap-around world map in high-gloss laminate swathes a brick of a book. Fortunately, its cheery look belies the rather provocative discourse of its contents.

Calling the book an atlas invites the reader to comprehend its premise of participation spatially. It necessitates an active engagement with the propositions mounted by the 'cultural activist' and 'spatial practitioner' essayists, as well as the broader socio-political agenda of shaping one's own environment. A quick glance through the biographies reveals a number of the authors are architecturally trained, yet have chosen to pursue spatial praxis from a broader, growing discontent with urban dystopia. Out of these uncomfortable scenarios, a series of perplexing questions emerges.

In anticipation of reviews, editors Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar pose, and solidly respond to, their own pithy question: 'Did someone say we need yet another anthology of essays?' I agree with their ardent belief in contextual engagement; however, one must ask whether the act of participation is well demonstrated in the past tense medium of a book? Here, the limits of the book format are compensated for by a series of participatory events. Positioned as a lodestone, the collection draws attention to the subject matter while sparking trans-disciplinary dialogue. A series of planned interactive events will open and promulgate discourse, like this year's Serpentine Gallery Pavilion opening, which took cues from Rem Koolhaas and book contributor Hans Ulrich Obrist. Miessen and Basar took part in the panel discussions, which offered a new model of interaction, the 24-hour interview marathon. This method of promotion and engagement filtered through in September's open meetings with the editors at Columbia University and New York's Van Alen Institute. The de rigueur website, didsomeonesayparticipate.com, keeps the interested reader apprised of upcoming events. In this way the book successfully and simultaneously comments on 'the relationships between space politics and power' in spatial practice, as well as initiating debate through a continual questioning of what spatial practice actually is. The anthology elides the distinction between the architect and the curator as it emphasises the trans-disciplinary 'culture of space'. It also highlights an important ideological shift; the idea of architect or curator as a guiding force, 'the one in charge of space,' is outmoded. However, the same roles recast the *au courant* theme of participation. 'The role of the curator is to create free space, not occupy existing space,' writes Obrist in the succinct 'Preface: Participation Lasts Forever'.

The true focus of the work moves beyond the loose composition of individual pieces to the book's core premise, which is to engender debate. This attempt to bring together viewpoints outside the traditional dominion of the architect demonstrates how complex spatial practice has become: from the finite boundaries of the archly qualified to the myriad authors delicately negotiating ever-more intricate systems. In this effort, the editors strongly assert an organisational structure, at once offering examples as to how one might frame such questions right down to the essential clarity of the definitions one applies. The overarching criteria is about promoting a cultural awareness of the manipulation of space and each essay provides an opportunity, not necessarily to resolve but to open discourse. The editors do not pretend to draw conclusions; their position, instead, proposes an understanding of the modified role of the architect/curator. The publication's structure demonstrates the editors' resolve to ensure participation.

Contributors include Obrist, Keller Easterling and Eyal Weizman among others. Obrist's preface expounds on the revised responsibilities of the

curator: 'If we consider the life of an exhibition as ongoing, we can view it as a complex dynamic learning system'. Easterling's piece focuses on stupidity and banality in spatial politics. Weizman, director of the doctoral programme in which many of the contributors and the editors are enrolled, contributes an essay on his continued observations of political power and spatial control in Gaza. Also noteworthy are the intriguing 'Mumbai City Dictionary,' a verbal-visual 'taxi_onomy' of place-names, and 'Topoi: Policies of Assertion,' a call to negotiate 'topoi' – the intertwined crises of politics and urban life. Following Obrist's subtitle-driven preface, the editors' introduction employs the same structure, inserting the thematic twist of participatory inquiry. Subject headings include: Flatness, Control, Empowered, Consensus, Atlas, Participants and Tactics, each followed by a question mark. 'Participation is simply a tactic of complicit curiosity scaled to the space you're currently in,' write Miessen and Basar. Clearly, it's time to get involved.

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