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Markus Miessen on Participation

May 04, 2008

There's a lot of talk about freedom of speech, but much less about the right to be heard. Sometimes it seems like no matter how loud you scream, pound your fists and stomp your feet, protest efforts seem futile and institutional walls impenetrable. This is what drew me to the book, *Did Someone Say Participate?*, edited by Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar, which describes the resourceful strategies by which spatial practitioners navigate and radically engage the system. [The book was recently selected for The Independent's list of the 10 best architecture books of all time.] Miessen's research is further explored through *The Violence of Participation* at the 2007 Lyon Biennale, which asked participants to draw their spatial perception of Europe, as a PhD candidate in Goldsmith's Research Architecture program, and as director of the Architectural Association's first Winter School in Dubai.

Heather Ring Usually when you hear about radical forms of engagement, they tend to be about *not* participating. You go off the grid, grow your own food and harness your own energy, you reject the privatized economy of the real-estate market and squat an abandoned building, you negate profit-driven business models and turn down work you don't agree with. Or at least - it's sort-of like participating in non-participation. How have you defined participation in your work? Is your definition inclusive of these negations?

Markus Miessen What I refer to does not necessarily relate to forms of opposition but alternative regimes of entry. How does one manage to gain access into fields of knowledge and practices that one is usually not invited to take part in. I don't think that negating will get you anywhere. It's like opposition: very often it is a way for cynics illustrating their impotence. Constructive criticism through offering alternatives is always more fruitful than simply being reactive.

Heather Could you describe some examples of how spatial practitioners have found alternate modes of entry into these fields?

Markus There are think tanks and other collectives and groups that have of course

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Markus Miessen
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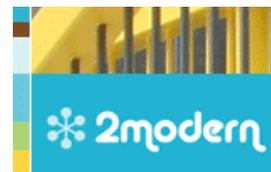
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been working on outsiders' expertise for a long time -- strategic consulting and so forth. One thing that I find quite problematic about conventional consulting though is that it takes almost for granted that things HAVE to change, i.e. if you look like McKinsey, Roland Berger etc, these guys come into a company, city, or even country (like in the case of Bahrain) and tell them how to change things. There is this unspoken rule that if they don't change this, they are not worth the money. I like to think of it more as someone, who in the British parliamentary system would be called a cross-bench politician, someone with no ties to the political parties at play. AMO of course have tried that for a while now, sometimes with huge success, like in the Europe project, sometimes with less success, not because they haven't done good work, but because it still takes sometime for others to understand the value of the architect's strategic expertise as an outsider that can challenge and critically add to existing institutional, economic, social or governmental frameworks.



Heather Maybe you could explain [AMO's Europe Project](#)?

Markus In 2001 Romano Prodi invited AMO to join a brainstorm session in which the future of Brussels as EU capital was discussed. As a result of this session, AMO started working on a series of projects including Europe's representation at large and subsequently developed a visual language that was associated with Europe, including what is now known as the "barcode flag".



Heather They have turned rather straightforward design expertise and propositional physical practice into agency and consultancy.

Markus A friend of mine, an architect in Austria, now runs workshops for McKinsey Germany, to teach them how to think 'outside the box': how can economists and politicians learn from architects. I am most interested in the political work of spatial practitioners. Projects, where authorships start to blur. We are now working on a project with the Slovenian Government, a project, which is in many ways a sequel to the Lyon project. It wouldn't have happened without it. The Consul General of Slovenia in New York realized that this outsider's perspective is somewhat interesting. I am doing this project together with [School of Missing Studies](#) (architect Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss and curator Katherine Carl).

Heather What are you bringing to the Slovenian government?

Markus Essentially curatorial knowledge; what we are doing at the events, and finally in the book, is to question and further the notion of Eastern Europe by starting to overlap voices from an imagined East Coast Europe and the East Coast of the United States. It seems that especially in the US, there is still a very cliched perception of Eastern Europe. We want to start a conversation about cultural and spatial perception of this, to my mind, currently most important part of the Union and how to deal with its expansion. One of the hypotheses that the project is based on is the one that I was working with for [The Violence of Participation](#) project, namely that Europe for many Europeans seems to be very difficult to grasp, because they do not perceive it, or cannot visualize it, as a space.



Heather You utilize the roundtable in your Violence of Participation installation - which is also the focal point of the [Research Architecture program at Goldsmiths](#) -

the "roundtable discussion." And your installation also seems to reference the voting booth. Is this the "architecture" of participation?

Markus I wouldn't say that it is "the" architecture of participation, but it can certainly be one tool to foster conversation, to create dialogue, often also one that is conflictual rather than consensual. In the Lyon roundtable design the notion of a roundtable for conversation was inverted by turning a space of communication into a space of isolation. The introduction of vertical fins meant that you couldn't actually talk to your neighbour, but only work on your own drawing (of your personal spatial perception of Europe) or grab a drawing from the centre-space (drawings that other people had submitted) and corrupt or hack them.



Heather What makes the participation "violent"?

Markus Obviously, there is no direct violence involved in this project. It can maybe be understood like strength of emotion, passion, or conviction: a violence of a feeling. We need forceful recipes for the idea of Europe not to be domesticated, ideas and visions that prevent any state of inactivity or equilibrium. This includes the breaking away from those representations that are most commonly associated with the "image" of Europe. The idea of a violent democracy in this case is based on the act of introducing people to the table who have previously not been invited to participate; but not in a romantic way, not in the sense of a participatory democracy that postulates an idea of inclusion and invitation of the entire social body. This is not an inclusive model of democracy, but one, which is very opportunistic and seizes the chance for a moment of rupture within a given system. It attempted to include the idea of the political into the space at the Biennial, to confront head-on the most basic question of the European Union: what do we have in mind when we think of Europe? What do we associate with Europe as a space?

Heather How can space -- and the spatial perception of Europe -- be then used as an instrument in political discourse?

Markus If I had a coherent, operational answer to this question right now, I would be a lucky man. One thing that seems to be evident from almost of the drawings is that politicians should pay attention to those voices as they very often indicate rather pressing issues. What was amazing to see also was that many of the "hacked" or "corrupted" drawings that were sent back to me to London suggested that there is a substantial divide between what the French -- who made up the majority of on-site audience at the Lyon Biennial -- and the rest of Europe and the world -- who made up the majority of the 100 commissioned drawings -- think. If I was an EU politician right now, one of the issues I would try to spend time and resources on would be how to explain more coherently the space that Europe is. I am looking forward to the first travel-guide to the European Union. If you asked me right now to draw a map of the political union, I would not be able to do this. I think this is alarming news.

Heather Was there anything that surprised you about the way people in the Violence of Participation started to describe Europe? Did you notice any meaningful differences coming from different regions?

Markus I think it is impossible to generalize it. Most of the contributions from the audience of the Biennial were from French nationals, so one of the re-occurring themes was the way that France in particular is dealing with immigration, especially from the Balkans and North Africa. If there is one aspect that seemed to be quite evident throughout the project is that many participants seem to feel uncomfortable about the overbearing presence of central/western European countries in the global perception of the EU.



Heather Now that you've invited the **biennale audience**, have you considered bringing this project on the road to engage in dialogue with the larger European community? Or, what about utilizing the Internet as a network to open up the discussion and allow a broader range of contributions?

Markus It is an ongoing project, a project without an end, just mid-level datums that I try to understand. There is in no way the idea that this will turn into some form of conclusion, but rather a field of opinions, an array of different readings that, in their entirety, can never be fully understood, as the European Union can never be boiled down to a single, easily digestible narrative. This would be like trying to find the "about" section on the **EU's website**. However, I would also be very interested in **inviting the Archinect audience to contribute and participate in this project**. As I am currently working on perceptions of Eastern Europe, I would be particularly interested in the readings and perceptions of (Eastern) Europe from a more global audience, especially readers from China, Russia and the US.



Heather In **With/Without**, you examine the global perceptions of the Middle East. How does this differ from the multiplicity of readings of Europe?

Markus This is a difficult question as I find it almost impossible to compare the two like this, also because it presupposes that there is such thing as a homogeneous Europe and a singular Middle East. Nevertheless, without trying to generalize, I think one might be able to say that the Middle East, and the Gulf region in particular, are currently going through an incredible phase. Not in terms of their construction boom, as any intelligent or not-so-intelligent daily newspaper around the globe has reported on by now, but because of the societal changes that these regions have been pushed through in the last two decades. Dubai is probably the epitome of those changes, where an entire society has been peacefully forced through modernity in a decade. When European newspapers today report about the shocking realities of Dubai's labour camps, they often forget to talk about another reality alongside it: that within two years the first labour unions were established and that the government has put in place a set of laws that start to hand over

rights from the construction companies to the labourers. This is only one of many examples. If a benevolent dictatorship, which Dubai is, can go through such dramatic changes within two years, and essentially emancipate an entire society within a decade, I -- as European -- am getting slightly worried about the pessimistic debate we are leading in regards to whether or not Turkey should be allowed to join the Union.

Heather Do critical spatial practices of the Middle East require a different set of strategies than those of Europe, to negotiate a different set of power structures? How did you maneuver through these channels in directing the first [AA Winter School in Dubai - Workers' Habitation / 24-hour City?](#)

Markus Yes, totally different. And I would argue that it is mainly an issue of scale. If we look at the Gulf region right now, and in more detail its institutional landscape, and investigate it in relation to the institutional landscape in Europe, we will detect that there is a complete lack of small-scale, public institutions. If we pay attention to the current politics of major universities in the US, especially the Ivy League ones, there is a worrying development regarding the outsourcing of campuses towards the Middle East. What is worrying is not that they are getting involved there in general, but that the average institution that is setting up a new campus is simply sending their home-campus-staff to teach there; often with no local expertise and employed on rolling contracts, which means that after three to four years they return to their host campus. This entails that these institutions are not interested in building up local knowledge at all but simply in the export of a particular methodology of knowledge and teaching. What needs to happen instead is the slow but steady development and building up of small-scale institutions that create a platform for local exchange and allow for the building up, fostering, and growth of local knowledge. Without trading entire histories for those imported from Europe or the US. I am currently working on two projects in Dubai and Abu Dhabi: one with my architectural office which will develop a spatial model for a smaller scale platform, which will present what one might call an anti-thesis to Dubai as we know it, and the other one with the cultural district in Abu Dhabi, where we are attempting to set up a new small-scale school, which is based on some of the premises that I introduced when setting up the Winter School in 2008; but no longer through the lens of an institution from Western Europe, but one that is growing locally.



Heather You're in sort of a unique position because you've actually gained an audience with political and institutional bodies. It seems like most disengaged or disenfranchised people, however, find the system to be bureaucratic and inaccessible. Are you situating yourself as a middleman between the voices of the people and the institutions? How do people, outside of consultancies, find effective ways to participate and drive change?

Markus I am not sure if I am the right person to be asking this question. I certainly do not have a universal answer. I agree that I am by now in a privileged position to be working on those projects. If you would have asked me three years ago whether I could imagine that I would be working on a project with the Slovenian government and the EU, I would have probably said no. Everyone can get engaged on the most basic levels. But I also think that one should not be naive. If we really want to generate serious change, we almost inevitably have to institutionalize. Whether in order to change policy for the government or to open a massive company that can change work environments and conditions for thousands of people. At the end of the day it's a question of scale.

Architect has been invited to contribute to the [Violence of Participation](#) project. [Check out the discussion and participate in spatializing Europe.](#)



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Maybe all those nations should form a federation of states that are all self governing and yet have a balance of power with a central government overseeing interstate issues like taxation and commerce. They could call it the United States. Wouldnt that be a cool and novel concept? God - Im glad the Europeans always think of the good stuff first. They are so smart.

Posted by: [clamfan](#) on May 04, 08 | 6:00 pm

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