

Overview

Aerial Image from Linz as a Colletive Artistic Experience

Accounts have come down to us from the early days of space flight of a psychological phenomenon known as the Overview Effect. This refers to a person experiencing a radical shift in the way he sees something that, although theoretically familiar, had never before been reflected from that perspective in direct perception. The origins of this concept lay in the shocking experience of seeing the Earth as a unique, fragile setting for human life, a realization that several astronauts came to at the sight of their home planet from outer space, and that made a more or less extreme impact on their esoteric-religious beliefs or even their level of political commitment.

There is yet to be talk of an analogous Overview Effect stemming from the sudden realization of actually being—or apprehension at possibly being—the object of a governmental surveillance apparatus that is arrayed globally or justified with reference to global security considerations. The “shock” is reserved first and foremost for either criminals and (regardless of whether rightfully or wrongfully) suspected wrongdoers, or people who, in the throes of googling curiosity, find themselves staring back out at them from an array of online “photo albums.” Nobody but a certifiable paranoid has yet developed a Sixth Sense that picks up the feelers of surveillance the same way that ... ya know, like, how you can sorta feel when somebody’s staring at you, sometimes. For example, late at night on the way home along a dark street, the footsteps of someone walking at some constant distance behind you tend sooner or later to provoke a physical reaction. And you either quickly pick up the pace in consideration of the possibility that you’re about to be mugged, or you suppress this impulse in light of the (statistically speaking, far higher) probability that somebody else’s way home is the same as yours. The cognizance of the virtual pursuer that crystallizes as the outcome of some unknown person’s capacity to determine your location within a radius of 10 meters—your personal spin-off from the nice folks who brought you the cellphone—nevertheless has not triggered much of an impact in most people’s consciousness. If they were able to sense the principles of suspicion and the blitz-flashes from the cameras of the global paparazzi who are successively upgrading their technological and political practices, millions of people would be complaining like mad. This sphere that still remains free of the resonance of collective experience has of late been the source from which the vulgar-argumentative individualization of the public sphere draws its operative effectiveness. According to this line of reasoning, nobody who has nothing to hide needs to fear scrutiny, and the very fact of trepidation is itself regarded as evidence of evil, that the one who has a problem with it actually is up to no good.

It used to be that, in political philosophy as well as in the actual practice of cultural life, the public sphere was determined by a relational and non-egocentric view of things, and a sphere of communication and action was engendered among human beings (Arendt) by interrelationships that they entered into as part of their dealings with the world. But now it has come to pass that the public sphere is being undermined to such an extent that the very “means” that brings about its existence—communication—is treated as something suspect. Vilém Flusser’s 1991 remark that the Internet is the technology of an anthropology in which we “are nodes of relationships that come into existence only in relation to others” seems, in the light of all that has occurred in the meantime, to be old-fashioned indeed. What ensues in the wake of this vulgar individualization with its accompanying loss of the endeavor to experience the world and come to terms with it is a trivialization of the public sphere. After all, without the experience of relational negotiation, the knowledge of relations and circumstances quickly mutates into a matter of taking note of how the Earth revolves around the Sun and confirming this world view with

the same equanimity that would be brought to an encounter with the diametrically opposed position whereby the Sun is a satellite of the Earth.

The public and the public sphere seem to be subject to a substitution process rigged in favor of a public interest in whose name a process of expropriation justified on the basis of superordinate, usually economic, interests is carried out, or progressive escalations of the state's asserted right of intervention said to be warranted by security interests are implemented. But a public sphere without a public doesn't exist.

Trivialization via individualization manifests itself in highly condensed form and exemplary fashion not only in the diverse digital forums designed for the staging and promotion of the self (*MySpace, YouTube* etc.) but also and above all in terminological reduction and, concomitantly, the reduction of the public sphere from a "matter of negotiation" to a right of use for the express purpose of consuming a selected assortment of offerings, a reduction in which free accessibility (until revoked or cancelled) represents access to only one thing. That which still seems questionable from the point of view of "the mission to instruct and inform" is ultimately compensated for when it's compared to the hedonistic methods wielded thereby. As long as the system of global sightseeing à la Google Earth already permits anybody to observe anybody else, whereby observers and observees together make up the cast of the world's greatest reality TV show, why, in point of fact, should one single case among many spoil all the fun everybody's deriving from the whole thing?

In the tension and interplay of a discourse having to do with the public sphere, with (involuntary) digital transparency and (voluntary) relinquishment of privacy, the Festival too is "going public" by doing some temporary "urban renewal" of portions of the cityscape and rededicating elements of the urban infrastructure into settings for artistic and discursive action. The *Second City* project evokes to a certain degree recollections of that public sphere that was never just a function but rather was always also a synonym for the city and the urban space that it engenders. *Second City* aims to bring forth an Overview Effect with respect to the vulnerability of the public sphere and the potential that it embodies in the interest of the public.

The setting of this "rezoning" of a cityscape into an artscape-or a real space into a virtual one-is Marienstraße, a side-street in downtown Linz. The prevalence of vacant retail space here strongly evokes the atmosphere of a stage set and makes pedestrians feel like they're walking among the artificial buildings of a virtual city like *Second Life*. Ars Electronica will put these premises to use and transform Marienstraße into "Second City," into the portal between reality and artificiality. There where the real urban stage set has failed miserably in its role as host is where virtual space will infiltrate and make itself at home. The new *mise en scène* in Marienstraße featuring the stylistic vocabulary of *Second Life* enables us to behold the actual but invisible omnipresence of digital spaces that surround us as a sort of second nature that we are incapable of perceiving with our sensory organs.

The project is being conducted according to a curatorial maxim: exhausted and vacated neighborhoods and retail spaces, these squares and streets, aren't just to be used as locations; instead, they're to be presented as resources for artistic intervention and adaptation.

The street that's undergoing morphing in this way will be serving as a venue for a major segment of the festival program that, subdivided into small elements and lineup components (exhibitions, installations, performances, talks, workshops etc.), grows out into the rest of the city. This calculated invasion of the public sphere grows in intensity on Saturday, beginning with Ray Lee's performative installation "Siren" that will accompany the rising sun from the top level of a downtown parking deck.

A Group Portrait from Above

The highlight of this day will be what is to a certain extent the inverse staging of an observation & control scenario that has long been a part of everyday life; here, however, the process of being under surveillance is taken to the point of absurdity through the active role of the persons being observed. Every man, woman and child is called upon to make his or her own personal statement amidst the grid of a high-definition, aerial scan of the city and, as a token of cognizance of what's going on about us, to direct an appropriately formulated message to the heavens.

A customized aircraft will circle Linz at an altitude of 1,140 meters and photograph the city. The entire city. A total of 4,424 exposures will be made during this approximately 4 1/2-hour flyover. The high-resolution technology won't leave much out of the picture either: each individual pixel will represent 8 cm² of Linz.

So then: 8 cm² is the minimum perceptible dimension, and a sheet of DIN-A4-size paper has certainly proven itself over the years to be a suitable means of attracting attention. Under these preconditions, particular artists are being invited to design diverse forms of signatures of a creative presence during the duration of the flyover. Artists will also be working together with groups of private citizens to invent and display appropriate signs and communiqués. But above all, this call-to-action is addressed to the general populace—You out there: come up with your own way of presenting evidence of your awareness of this sort of observation. This might be a spontaneous act like simply spreading your arms; though perhaps something slightly “conspiratorial” like a human chain is more your style; or maybe you'd just like to mow your message into the grain of your front lawn, or gather your family under a bedsheet to stake out your own blank space in the eye-in-the-sky's field of vision.

This exhortation calls upon people to use a pre-announced surveillance operation as a dramatic setting in which to stage manifestations of the perception and interpretation of this procedure: to step out of the role of passive object and, as active subject, to re-interpret this fact-of-life into an opportunity for creative abuse; to not turn away and avoid seeing what's going on but, instead, to look back and stare it down. On one hand, of course, inherent in this is the intention to be conscious of the “feelers of surveillance”; on the other hand, another intentional aspect of this action is to create an image of the city as a group portrait of its citizenry with an eye towards 2009, the year in which Linz will be European Capital of Culture—a role and an honor that correspond to a topographical representation of the city only when it also is recognizable as a context of interpersonal action and mentality. Art—and especially art in that strategic context which is perhaps best suggested by the process of terminological revision that turns the “art in public space” into the “art of the public sphere”—has made quite a name for itself as a very experienced and knowledgeable partner in such negotiations in this connection. With the entire territory bounded by Linz's city limits being declared an artistic space, an entirely new significance is attributed to a phrase whose use has become rather inflationary: “an entire city becomes a stage.” The stage isn't just a setting for actors playing upon it; it's an integral part of the action in which the actors are staging themselves as the real production.

This “piece”—*Linz schaut zurück / Linz Looks Back* ;-)- will be the subject of detailed and comprehensive documentation online. Excerpts will be shown in public: on one hand, in the form of an exhibition in the artistic spaces of galleries in which they will thus be returned to the art world's own frame of reference; and, on the other hand, in shop windows and display cases throughout the city, the granddaddy of all reference systems.

Cheese!

Translated from German by Mel Greenwald

