

Auxiliary, a situation as real as fictional

Koen Van Synghel with Ilona Ruegg on Radio 3 Brussels 11/98, published in Kunst-Bulletin 4/99, Zürich.

Normally people consider space as something functional or utilitarian: In fact space can be a very strong mental or conceptual vehicle. An interesting element in the work of Ilona Ruegg, and specially in the project she made in the empty Central Tower in Brussels, is exactly the combination and the integration of space, as both a functional and a mental given. The Loterie Nationale had just moved out. The conciergerie was almost never used as such, and since 1992, a number game had been drawn there. A large glass window-screen overlooking the entrance hall was covered by a dark curtain during the six years of the number game. In this particular space, which was made like a box within the framework of the office Tower, Ruegg inserted a temporary platform of plywood with a small gap following the shape of the room. Holes were cut in the platform in order to put a series of chairs with their four legs on the original floor. – In this space, during a period of 14 days, every day from 3 p.m. until 8 p.m. Ruegg took care of the empty place of the caretaker, and invited people to come there to talk, to sit, to read a newspaper, just to wait as a stand-in for the caretaker.

Calling so called calling, a new project in preparation, explores again the mental and symbolic meanings of a place. The project is planned to be installed in a former agency of Wagon Lits, and will be an investigation on displacement and communication. Six telephones on two floors, with internal and external connections invite people to talk with others in different places and on different levels.

Koen Van Synghel: You live and work in Brussels. How do you read and live this city as a foreigner?

Ilona Ruegg: I like Brussels for its diversity. There is no finishing layer of correctness and aesthetics over the city that would make invisible the difficulty of living together of one million people in an urban place. – It seems to me that the city has a structure of grown incoherence, it seems to be split in many different parts.

KVS: Why did you choose the Loterie Tower?

IR: I was looking for a busy place in the city, a place that people frequent with great repetition, a place they go for, for their money, the money they have or they don't have, where they go for their dreams. The Loterie Nationale occurred to me to be a good place to respond to that notion. But I was looking also for a place that would not exactly offer the fulfillment of one's dreams, but offer a certain void, a certain boredom, a situation of an absence.

KVS: You made a so-called "site spécifique" project. The site is not only the former Loterie Tower which was first designed as a hotel, and will be now rebuilt as an office building, but also the city of Brussels.

IR: I chose the location for precise reasons, because it is a complete and already existing situation which generates an absence. I neither wanted to make an exhibition in this place, nor do I want to make a work about the place, nor to appropriate this architecture of the 60's, just to have an extra value for my work. The situation is complete as it is, I don't want to add something. I like to take place in my work, much like others can take a place in my work. I look for a situation with the least possible alienation, but with the greatest artificiality. In this sense I like to open an existing urban situation, a situation we don't have to be introduced to, because we have already an experience with it, or a memory of it. This conciergerie in the Central tower exists, it is a serving place par excellence. The role of the caretaker is always deferring to somebody else. He takes care for somebody else, just like one can try to care for this place in his place. – the situation reflects the place of the single person in the cityscape, which is always related to all the other single places.

KVS: One of the objectives of your project „In Your Place“ is to do a series of activities in empty, unused situations in which you want to hold open "the void". Why "the void" is so important? Has it to do with the unrevealed meaning of urban conditions, with melancholy, with time?

IR: I intend to do a series of Situation Projects, but I don't think that all of them will happen in an empty place. In this first situation of „And if you came only to take care of the caretaker, who would take care of you in your place?“, however it is important. The Loterie Nationale is at present time not anymore in the building, but the notion of the game is still there, together with the notion of a huge working place for a lot of people. And the place of the caretaker is empty. This void gives a situation of nonsaturation and therefore a possibility to think it, always to open it, not to close it. – I try to work on towards other situations where I can be in a twofold sense,

where I can hold open a place that doesn't necessarily exist, but is generated.

KVS: You sent invitations for the project out with question: „ And if you came only to take care of the caretaker, who would take care of you in your place?“ ... and further on: „Mrs Dewitte, if you please“. You adress your question very directly to your invités. Do you want the people to play an important role in your project?

IR: Yes, on some invitations the name of the invited person is in the most prominent place of the invitation. That's how it is, I think. I try to take care in the place of the caretaker, but invite others to take a seat in his place too. The question is, if everybody does so, I mean to take care in the place of somebody, then it should be true that everybody is related elsewhere and so on. It's a human condition, isn't it?

KVS: Are the people the project?

IR: It is an important question to me: the question where is the work, can it be located? Is it the seats, is it the large glass window, is it myself, is it the participants, is it the building, is it the story? Each of these elements take part in the situation, but none of them alone would make it. It is maybe more like in mathematics, that the elements of an operation are looking for a new problem. The only element I introduce in the existing situation is an inserted platform, which doesn't touch the walls. The 10 seats are fixed in their place by standing them in four holes, cut in the platform. It is a little bit puzzeling to consider where you are, because you walk on a double floor that doesn't touch the building, but you take place on a seat that stands on the original floor.

KVS: In this project you work in a conceptual way. How did you develop it? From a concept of: space? Human actions or from socio-cultural-antropological concepts?

IR: I think it happens much simpler in the process towards a work. There is no such preconceived grid of theory or conceptual construct to direct me. It's rather something that insists for a long time as a unformulated question, nothing very new, somewhere always related to space, to human activities, to time. Trying to construct around these terms never helped. It seems that through the years I was working always on the same questions. I was e.g. interested in something almost flat and extended, and in the repetition of one and the same. For the last 3 years I was intregated by an auxiliary situation comparable to the space we used when we added numbers and carried the decimals to the next stage. The numbers remain only shortly there and wait to be taken further on. These things happen also in memory facilities. I was searching for an Auxiliary Quality in existing urban situations, in the ongoing process of every day life. The conciergerie in the Loterie Nasionale building responds to this quality. The place is ready to take function to care for something, that is not itself. The place of the caretaker, who always cares for somebodyelse, is empty, he is not there.

KVS: What's the importance of language(s) in your work? It seems to me that you want to underline, to repeat even, the meaning of things, and in the same time, by repeating your language, your messages become a kind of poeatry.

IR: I am myself in a situation to be almost always outside of my mothertongue, often jumping from one language to another, which I speak all of them uncomplete, but I speak. I learnt a lot from the missgivings I am able to produce with funny or not so funny consequences. I became interested more and more in how language moves and what it produces in the difference from one word to almost similar one, or what happens when the same word takes another place. – Sometimes a word is completely present by not coming to my mind. – As my work moved towards situations, where people are involved, it seemed natural that I started to work with words. I started with simple phrases, repeating them, overlapping them – not so much to produce meaning, but rather to open a movement towards a sense of language itself.

KVS: You say „I tend towards a doublefilling of an already existing situation..“ Do you think that one can draw a line from „Doublefilling“ over „doubling“ – dédoubleur - , the effect of mirroring, the real and the representation, to the ideas of Plato of the real thing and the shadow.? What I want to know is, if this project is a product of philosopy, of a philosophy and esthetic theory? Or has it to do with a negation of, or critics on the ruling system of galleries, musea within the world of art?

IR: A lot of questions – Yes. What I want to do is to cross the existing situation with a doublefilling. In the way like an apron doubles the outline of the body with almost nothing and alters the situation completely. – Or you take two sheets of paper and make a cut half through each of them, insert one cut in the other. Where they cross, there would be left no shadow. To stand-in for the caretaker, whilst he is not there, makes present the people who are there to hold open his place, but also the absence of the caretaker. I don't want to make philosophy to

deliver me a product. But I am interested in the place where something happens, this place is sometimes wider than we often think. Possibly the fictional is in the real or in fact the real could be the fiction. I realise this project outside the system of art institutions, but I don't want to indicate with it, that it is not possible within that system. I would just have other implications. One day I will have to deal with that too.

KVS: This project is not an isolated project. You want to go on with this type of „replacement“

IR: Yes, I try to work on towards other situations where I can take the place unnecessarily twice, where I can hold open a place that doesn't necessarily exist, but is generated.

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Koen van Synghel is an Architekt und Publicist. He teaches at the Architektur Institute in Antwerpen