

Sensually Yours

Mika Hannula, in „Air House / Time Construction 4“, 2006, published for the occasion of the project at Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt

By its own definition, a public place is a peculiar site. It is public as in a space that is open and accessible to many, not just a few. But for it to be a meaningful public site, it must generate an experience of itself that is particular and personal. It is thus always a combination of both – something common and general that is in constant interaction with something that is private and specific. The crucial make-it-or-break-it point is how this intertwined collision and caressing of wishes, wants and fears not only *takes* place but more precisely *becomes* a place. Not somewhere around there, but precisely right there, and right now.

With her project *Air House / Time construction 4*, Ilona Ruegg created an unorthodox setting out of a number of very ordinary elements and components. A project which is as plain as it is pleasurable – its connotations growing in time and extending in depth. Basically, what she did was to “hijack” the elements of an orchid house that was to be built near Frankfurt. With permission, she introduced a carefully planned and orchestrated deviation and delay into the building process for the duration of one week. She was able to borrow all the constitutive parts of the future orchid house - nine prefabricated concrete plates and nine associated ventilators - which she placed at the front of the exhibition building in Mathildenhöhe in Darmstadt.

Ruegg positioned these concrete plates of various dimensions and sizes and the functioning ventilators so that people entering the yard were confronted by them. Plates as parts in installed scenery while the ventilators buzz and blow. What they saw was a double act of something happening and being suspended at the same time. An act that set itself into an operational site by adding to it propositions which are not functioning as we have grown accustomed for building materials to do. They do add up to something, but in a very unusual way. We thus have the subtle movement between expectations and experiences, between assumed function and dislocated sensibility that produces a distinct meaningfulness not through the quality of the objects themselves or the place where they are located, but through the manner in which these objects and the site affect each other in a new and unaccustomed way.

As an act, Ruegg’s project is strikingly close to the strategy of making something that we normally take for granted stick out and become visible, of making it be seen in a different and previously unacknowledged light. A strategy, which Michel Foucault labeled as *eventualization*. It is a mental and physical tool that allows us first to pay attention and to recognize how everyday life is structured, and then to shape and make the rules of the game in an alternative way. Quoting Foucault, eventualization is “a breach of self-evidence. It means making visible a *singularity* at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait, or an obviousness that imposes itself uniformly on all” (1987, 104).

What Foucault was after was the particular discursive means of showing and documenting that things are not always exactly as they seem, and that there are ways of breaking the spell of normalization and hidden power games. Moreover, according to Foucault, “eventualization means rediscovering the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies, and so on that at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal, and necessary. In this sense one is indeed effecting a sort of multiplication or pluralization of causes.” (Ibid)

With *Air House / Time construction*, Ruegg produces a rather unexpected version of an eventualization. It is unique as an act that simply cannot be repeated. It is unique also due to its inherent logic and attitude. Quite obviously, there is the act of relocating something that is meant to be on its way somewhere else. What becomes significant within this detour of a functionality is the very particular way Ruegg does it. Unlike so often with strategic focuses of eventualization, this spatial project is not about retelling a history so that an underdog’s or an underrepresented person’s (or collective’s) voice comes to be heard. Ruegg is not uncovering secrets; she is not throwing light onto the murky sides of building practices and business.

What Ruegg does is something strangely emotional and effective. Her act of making an event with these concrete plates and the noise manufactured by the ventilators is closer to caressing than pointing the finger at the wrongs of the world. Not as an abstract possibility or theoretical phenomena, but as – yes – essentially as how solid blocks of concrete and metal are placed on a real-life site. With her act, she certainly feels for the site, and for the chosen materials. Not as a confused type of tree-hugger who has gone metallic all of a sudden, but as someone who wants to add something to the experience of a site by bringing into it something

that seemingly does not belong – and doing it so that it makes us feel for these objects, makes us see them as more than just functional forms and instrumentalized material.

As a result, these carefully placed objects gain a new life. Not as an illusion, but as a suspension that becomes sensual in its nature. It is not a life disconnected from their actual function. These objects enjoy a borrowed life beside their destination. Ruegg underlines the ingenious double act again. By making visible the materials which are typically hidden in the structure of a building - this time an orchid house which is about to be built - we get a glimpse of the connections and materiality of the nuances of how things are kept up and running. We not only pay attention to what this future green house is made of, we automatically become aware of the whole road map of getting from there to there, acknowledging this uncanny here that is created by an extra stop, a resting place at the Mathildenhöhe that becomes something out of the ordinary, interacting with its political, historical, psychological and economical background.

It is a project that serves as a pleasantly surprising example of the new type of public art. An art work that knows where it comes from in the practice of visual communication happening outside the white cube, but it does not let itself be captivated by the legacy of the past glories of minimal interventions and constellations. Instead, it is an act that itself challenges the presuppositions and parameters of site-specific art by changing the focus from the pure physicality of a site into the very nature of an ongoing process that is, yes, predominantly about the journey itself that cannot be controlled or contained, and is not about arriving at some final proposition. And yes, it does it with a sly humor that reminds me of the fun of watching the grey paint dry on a white wall. A process filled with sweet anticipation that is as serious as it is senseless.

Air House / Time construction does this critical and reflective interpretation of a site-specific practice in at least three ways. These are ways that start with the idea and reason behind the intervention, and continue with the content of temporality that is provided and culminating in the non-proprietary notion of this act as a work.

Ruegg's idea and reason for this work returns us to the inherent bipolarity of the act. It is public and it is private. It is detached but at the same time passionately participatory. Most of all, it does what it does without a reason or demand. It gives attention to the materials of an orchid house without asking for anything back. It listens to the materials and their individuality, but does not expect them to care or to listen back. The act leaves them to be what they can be in that temporary notion of an emotional state of being in a particular site.

It is an act of solitary hospitality. An act that relies on its structure of temporality. An act with objects that we realize are not to stay, but are later – only after a week's duration - meant to be moved to their proper destination. A movement that leaves traces that are not visible but which are felt – and taken with us in the physical memory of the intervention in a site. A temporality that gains its force from the act of not wanting anything back. It is powerless, and without any means of claiming something. It waits there, defenseless and radically open. Ready for any reaction or action.

However, this is a presence that is not passive. It is an active disposition. A certain readiness to see and to feel for the particular site and the relationships in it. It is not resigned or submissive. It is exposed, and willingly so – exposed to interaction, to give and take, to collisions and clashes. It is a proposition of a beginning within which what becomes something is not decided a priori but is only meaningful and possible within the process and the experiences created during it.

The notion of giving without being asked for it is crystallized in the relationship that Ruegg has to her work. It is an act as a carefully planned and constructed intervention. An act that stems from her, but does not belong to her. It is given away – towards the space, towards the people experiencing that site. Ruegg is very clear about not wanting or wishing to claim an ownership of the objects in the project. The act of detouring and relocating in itself is what it is about.

An act that disrupts, but not destructively. It opens up, and lets something unexpected and unplanned emerge. An act that is based on the logic of sharing, not owning. It is about respect and the necessity to include, not to exclude. An act that reminds us of the idea of the open source principle and the production of knowledge based on commons based peer group situations, which is non-proprietary but nevertheless highly motivating and successful. Like the tale of Robin Hood. This time not stealing anything from anyone, but borrowing with permission. It is about setting a proposition to think with, and then leaving the scene and the site for the temporary use for anyone wishing to take advantage of the invitation to see, feel and be differently, but to do it

in such a way that the site is respected and is available as it was for you and for the use of others after you have gone.

A work of art as an intervention that gives us what we most desperately desire. It provides us with a hope that there is a way to move, not completely outside the structures, but beside them. It is the participation in the production of knowledge that does not necessarily need to be based on exploitation, proprietary logic of demand and supply, or on exact limiting signature of the owner and the maker.

Instead, what Ruegg manages to do is to invite us into a unique process that distinctly comes from somewhere, is for that given moment something singular at a specific site, and then changes its character and goes again somewhere else to be something completely different. An act that reminds us of the critical wish by Miwon Kwon (1997, 110), asking and appealing for site specific acts not to happen just one after another, without any connection or content driven exchange between them, just like multiple and endlessly mass produced items that are more like zombies spurning out of their atavistic caves.

What is needed and what is required are critical reflection, alternative strategies and caressing and sensual interaction. Acts that happen next to one another, and which relate to each other and reflect on each other. Comparing, connecting and constructing compassionately. Like a difference talking to a difference. An act of amazing grace, which happens without guarantees, without any chance of a solution. Just that fleeting moment of sharing, and being together which is not only what we've got to go and live for, but which, at the best of times, is plenty and pleasant enough.

Mika Hannula was the curator for the Estonian Pavilion at Venice Biennial 2007 and curated the show *Situated Self* with Branko Dimitrijevic in Belgrade and in Helsinki the year 2005. He also curated the show on artistic research called *Talkin Loud and Saying Something – Four Perspectives into Artistic Research* in Gothenburg in 2008. In 2012 he curatoed, again with Branko Dimitrijevic, the 53rd October Salon in Belgrade called *Good Life*.

Literature

Michel Foucault, *Question of Method: An Interview with Michel Foucault, After Philosophy, End of Transformation?*, edited by Baynes, Bohman & McCarthy, The MIT Press 1987
 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Notes of Site Specificity*, October 80, Spring 1997