05 2003

Inverted Towers

Gerald Raunig

Translated by Edda Hoefer

The key thing may be to create vacuoles of non-communication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control.[1]

Karlsplatz is one of the most important and most central traffic junctions of Vienna, at the same time a place of disparity, complexity and a 'traffic hell'. Its surface, consisting mainly of multi-laned roads with many islands of different sizes in between them, denies itself to the pedestrian, while underneath there is a typically transitory urban space, a junction of several underground-lines, which generate an enormous stream of working people and tourists who traverse it every day. Clearly, conditions like these do not constitute the urban planning ideal of a city's administration. Since architects, town planners and planning commissioners have not presented any moderately priced ideas in recent years for doing away with the diffusion and alleged ugliness[2] of the square, the City of Vienna seems to be resorting to art now. The social-democratic mayor of Vienna was recently fantasising that he wants to make the 'presently unattractive square' into "Kunstplatz Karlsplatz" (Karlsplatz, a place for art), which is to be 'newly organised and should invite a leisurely walk'. To this end he plans a synergistic cooperation of those cultural institutions which are located on or around Karlsplatz now (Historical Museum,

Künstlerhaus, Kunsthalle, Musikverein, Technical University). In view of such concentrated political interest there is a danger of:

1. a policy of beautification of a place, which in addition to all its problems needs nothing less than the embrace of classical art activity. When elsewhere the colonisation of a place by means of art results in proliferous gentrification, here it may be functionalised within the frame of a bourgeois-populist urban planning project in its old role of beautifier in the shape of an autonomous or pseudo-contextual object or some alternative guiding system.

2. the instrumentalisation of art as catalyst for a process in which a bourgeois minority more and more swamps and standardises[3] the square. The production of art is hailed as a communicative process, yet in this context it would be more a lubricant for bourgeois entertainment, or, stated more prosaically: for parties and gastronomy. The art institutions would become marginally-praised side issues of their own coffee shops, book shops or merchandising shops.

3. the displacement of marginal groups, who have been using Karlsplatz as their meeting place, most of them people identified by the authorities as drug users, alcoholics and homeless. This implies the continuation and completion of complementary practises of privatisation and the commands of society control: the subterraneous pedestrian passage underneath Karlsplatz has in recent decades been increasingly developed and smoothed over, and in the end the remaining area has been rendered unusable to its former users by the rather indecent introduction of 'high culture': to drive the habitués away from the area, where the subterraneous womb of Karlsplatz opens, the authorities had speakers installed – like in the main station of Hamburg and

similar public spaces in Europe - which emit music by Mozart. Not a particular favourite of people who see themselves as outlaws.

The situation might sound very specific, but it has a lot to do with the general processes and problems of a city, with gentrification and the privatisation of public spaces. In the urban setting of expanding control regimes, neither political praxis nor theory can stop at Habermas' concept of the bourgeois public sphere as the place for civil consensus.
The 'public sphere' as a normative term rather implies that in each case, where yet another piece of public area is expropriated, this expropriation is "made public". To make public in this context means two things: one to expose, disturb and thwart the neo-liberal strategy of permanent expropriation, the other the *creation* of public sphere[4] specifically in places that are in danger of expropriation.

Strategies of Reappropriation

Of the many strategies emanating from cultural background and aiming at the reappropriation of public space, I would like to describe four in the context of the urban space Karlsplatz:

1. The first possibility recommending itself, which was developed extensively in the nineties, is a micro-political artistic intervention into clearly defined spaces, i.e. through the more radical forms of Community Arts, New Genre Public Art, interventionist art.[5] Involved people and experts would cooperatively develop various alternative models for their environment. If the action is too hasty, a widely discussed problem might occur: *non*-disturbance instead of disturbance. Community Arts projects often function as catalysts for the general withdrawal of the welfare state because their reform

orientation does not go far enough.[6] The contrary argument could still be raised that at least concrete results in concrete contexts have been achieved in some of the better cases. In 1993, for example, "WochenKlausur", a group of interventionist artists, starting from the Secession introduced a project for the medical care of homeless people on Karlsplatz, which succeeded at least in setting up depots for the remaining belongings of people living in the street and – as its biggest success – a bus for the medical treatment of people needing help, which was not only stationed at Karlsplatz but also at eight other locations.[7]

2. Even more common than the first strategy is the classical lobbyistic interventionist strategy: In direct communication with the politicians in charge or – less directly – via the most far-reaching mainstream media, intellectuals and cultural decision makers bring to bear their symbolic capital and become *citoyen* instead of *bourgeois* – or else, they form a citizens' initiative. In the context of cultural politics and urban planning this happened as early as 1990 when an ultraconservative citizens' initiative opposed the plan for the Viennese 'Museum Quarter' (Wiener Museumsquartier) aided by the campaigns of "Kronen-Zeitung"[8] and FPÖ[9] opinion polls. The initiative insisted that the protection of historical monuments be a considerable criterion in cultural policy and urban planning. Since the beginning of 2003, possibly relating to this notorious citizens' initiative, another group started a campaign called 'Open up Karlsplatz' for Karlsplatz to become a 'site for open cultures'. Even though their programme sounded like a bad advertisement for a mediocre household cleaner, it succeeded immediately in increasing the interest in the subject, which up till then had only been dealt with by politicians and local government officials. As early as the beginning of January 2003 the major liberal newspaper "Der Standard" reported on the Karlsplatz-

initiative and the journalist Thomas Rottenberg quoted a certain Karl Latz, said to be a proponent of the initiative: 'the possible reorganisation of the square poses a historical chance', the square should not only serve in 'museum-like ways' for storing art in the museums along the fringe of Karlsplatz. In the same newspaper the extensive report was followed by a commentary, in which left-wing critics of the initiative complained about the vagueness of its concept. Slogans and empty phrases like 'A place for open cultures paving the way for democracy' could be taken up by all political directions because of their indeterminacy and used for their purposes. Soon thereafter first doubts arose as to the authenticity of the initiative on the occasion of an event for "Kunstplatz Karlplatz". The same journalist who had written the first report and interviewed Karl Latz, eventually negated his existence in the "Standard": "The citizens' initiative is as real as its 'founders' appearing on homepage www.verkehrshoelle.at. None of these persons exist."

3. If this assertion proves correct, we come to the third strategic variation against the expropriation of public space: The subversive praxis of the communication guerrilla[10] is an attempt to interrupt and interfere with communication flows by means of fakes, media sabotage and other tricks, in order to help surface discourses, which were not visible before. Or to shift existing discourses: a citizens' initiative is able to unsettle or disrupt a discourse, to make a breach, to create"empty vacuoles of non-communication" as Deleuze calls it. At the same time this destructive act creates the possibility to make use of the gap in the discourse for producing critical public spheres.

4. The most relevant current stream of "committed urbanism" is ever more evident in the metropoles as practices of an *activist* reappropriation of the city: historically rooted in Situationist

practices, particularly in France in the sixties, the German squatter fights in the seventies and eighties, the English "Reclaim the Streets" movement in the nineties[11] up to the present public disobedience of the Disobbedienti[12] in Italy and the protests against the Schill party in Hamburg[13]. Anti-state movements not only reject a social retrenchment and the processes of expropriation of public spheres as described, but offensively take possession of urban spaces. That does not only influence changes in political activisms against urban control regimes, but also the art practices which intervene in social areas – as described under item 1 – and are in danger of *non*-disturbing and boosting rather than disturbing capitalist flows of communication. What has been missing in the art practices of the nineties "seems to be given in a new situation: being embedded in a larger context, being cross-connected with social movements. Joining the heterogeneous activities against economic globalization, the old forms of intervention art are being transformed and new ones are emerging."[14]

In Vienna the net-culture initiative Public Netbase is one of the homebases for all kinds of projects from communication guerrilla to activism. In 2000 Public Netbase[15] established itself as a platform for antagonistic actions especially in the field of music and DJ culture[16] in the context of artistic protests and demonstrations against the government; it is also continually active on behalf of the Karlsplatz.In June 2003 Public Netbase organized an event called "Open Cultures" (quite near to the slogan of the citizens' initiative) at the Karlsplatz and at the same time participated in a large-scale sound demo *free re:public*. These politics of occupying the actual space of the Karlsplatz are not without self interest. Public Netbase is one of several cultural initiatives, which wants to underpin the haphazard activities around "Kunstplatz Karlsplatz" with the radical construction of a critical

public sphere, beyond the slogans like 'non-space' and 'traffic hell'. Beyond the phantasms of city planners and control society, who dream of a social clean-up and spatial transparency, beyond a cheap instrumentalisation of art institutions for these strategies, a place should be created which reaches far into the world.

The Inverted Tower

We are digging the pit in the evening dusk
We are digging the pit of Babel
Much too high was our vantage point
We are digging the pit of Babel
With precious timber we're lining it
We are drilling the tunnel of Babel
Power for light we install in it
We are drilling the tunnel of Babel
Outside a party is reaching its peak
We are digging the pit of Babel[17]

In the bourgeois Museum Quarter of Vienna a symbolic battle was fought about a reading tower, between those who advocated a tower - 67 m high, taller than any building around it and visible from afar - as a symbolic landmark of the cultural quarter and the citizens' initiative mentioned earlier, which opposed it for reasons of historical preservation and urban planning.[18] The fight between the belated modernists and the guardians of cultural heritage became highly emotional and was waged under strong media coverage. The alternative between the reactionary prevention of new buildings and the realisation of a reading tower as exemplary representational architecture is basically all wrong. Where the creation of public sphere and reappropriation of public

space are involved, the notion of representational buildings must be criticised, be they old or new.

The band Einstürzende Neubauten sang about "The Pit of Babel", thereby alluding to Franz Kafka[19], the literary expert for the building of towers and other constructions. Kafka's concept of the tower in his novel "The Castle" is far from the usual idea of the ivory tower which transcends and stands high above barbaric worldliness. On the contrary, his tower in "The Castle" opens upward as if an inhabitant locked in the house had "broken through the roof and risen up ..., to show himself to the world."[20] And Kafka goes one step further in inverting this metaphor by maintaining that progress is only possible if the extreme station on the tower is relinquished. Kafka's fragment "I ran away from her ..." contains the remark, to which Einstürzende Neubauten allude, "What are you building? I want to dig a pit. Progress must be made. My station is too high. We are digging the pit of Babel."[21]
The notion of the pit, the inverted tower, is the juxtaposition of the ivory tower. Against a policy of representation in the old or the new style, this notion does not counterpose anything visible or central, but invisible, indescribable. Therefore the inverted tower is not a metaphor, but the creation of something invisible, i.e. of discourse and dissent, of conflictual public sphere. Against the towering supremacy of art a hole must be dug, which reaches deep down into the world.[22] A space where no-one can pretend to observe all global happenings, where progress is made just by leaving one's too elevated station, all the more connected to molar lines and systems. And in our context the experimental set-up for the inverted tower proves to be particularly favourable, and the supposed metaphor turns altogether towards the material: During the course of constructing the underground below Karlsplatz some

subterraneous spaces became vacant, which were intended for cultural purposes.
There is no lack of cultural initiatives, which could imprint on the place. This channel of discourse and its constructively crisscrossing vocal streams could not only supply a suitable venue for initiatives such as Public Netbase and Depot, formerly based at the Museum Quarter, but also - going beyond this and involving other groups - provide a new politico-cultural focus which has been lacking so far in Vienna. Radical discursive culture initiatives, net culture, media art, art theory could try their hand at overlapping art, politics and theory, without driving away those marginal groups, who are currently the hallmarks of Karlsplatz. The inverted tower would not be a place for bourgeois contemplation like the reading tower, nor a venue for spectacles, but a place of actuality, of contemporary becoming, a tower that is pointed into today's world.

---

[1] Gilles Deleuze, Control and Becoming, in: Deleuze, Negotiations, New York, 1995, p. 175

[2] an old topos of the aesthetics of German Idealism: that disuniformity is ugly.

[3] I.e. structurally "beautifies".

[4] Cf. Gerald Raunig, Charon. Eine Ästhetik der Grenzüberschreitung, Vienna 1999, particularly p. 119-121; and http://www.eipcp.net/diskurs/d05/text/geraldraunig02.html

[5] Cf. the texts under pre_public, http://eipcp.net/transversal/0102

[6] Cf. e.g. http://eipcp.net/transversal/0102/kwon/en or Gerald Raunig , *Spacing the Lines.* Konflikt statt Harmonie. Differenz statt Identität. Struktur statt Hilfe. In: Eva Sturm/Stella Rollig (Ed.), Dürfen die das? Kunst als sozialer Raum, Vienna 2002, p.118-127

[7] Cf. Erich Steurer, Intervention zur medizinischen Versorgung der Obdachlosen, in: Wolfgang Zinggl (Ed.), WochenKlausur. Gesellschaftspolitischer Aktivismus in der Kunst. Vienna/New York 2001, p. 20-26

[8] Newspaper with the highest circulation reaching more than 50% of the Austrian population and a continuation of racist columns and pseudo-ecological articles

[9] Jörg Haider's radical populist right-wing Freedom Party

[10] Cf. http://www.contrast.org/KG/, Handbuch der Kommunikationsguerrilla, Berlin 1997, and texts under http://eipcp.net/transversal/1202

[11] Cf. http://eipcp.net/transversal/0902/hamm/en

[12] http://republicart.net/cal/resslerinterview.htm

[13] http://eipcp.net/transversal/1202/wieczorek/en

[14] http://republicart.net/manifesto/manifesto_en.htm

[15] www.t0.or.at

[16] Especially in conjunction with the so-called "Volkstanz", part of the anti-government protest actions, cf. Gerald Raunig, Wien Feber Null. Eine Ästhetik des Widerstands, Vienna 2000, p. 82-86

[17] Einstürzende Neubauten, Der Schacht von Babel [The Shaft of Babel], Text: Bargeld, Music: Bargeld/Hacke/Unruh

[18] The concept of the tower disappeared after repeated rededication and shortening in the names of building regulation, urban planning and preservation of historical buildings. In this case the citizens' initiative won (cf. http://www.t0.or.at/~zursache/muqua/6.htlm), but could not prevent the museum quarter.

[19] Franz Kafka, Der Bau, in: ibid., Sämtliche Erzählungen, Frankfurt/Main 1970, p. 359-380

[20] Franz Kafka, Das Schloss, in: ibid., Romane und Erzählungen, Cologne 1998, p.21

[21] http://www.kafka.org/projekt/nachlass4/ichentlief.html

[22] Cf. Gerald Raunig, Charon. Eine Ästhetik der Grenzüberschreitung. Vienna 1999, p. 119