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MAG

Material Atmosphere Gravity

Abstract. This essay reflects on ephemeral artistic practices in the contemporary city and their critical capacities in the face of the alienation, insecurity and fear that we feel in the public space. We live in an atmosphere of anguish in today's liquid society. Our relationship with the Media, mainly digital, with the public space and with knowledge, is mediated by an 'economy of attention', which reduces space by expanding time. How do architects and artists answer these questions? Based on artistic interventions in the urban space, we intend to verify how their approaches/installations contribute to critical thinking in the face of contemporary environmental, political and social circumstances.

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“Literary performance can only be meaningful if it emerges from a rigorous alternation between action and writing; it has to elaborate on flyers, brochures, newspaper articles and posters, the unpretentious forms that better correspond to its influence on active communities than the ambitious universal gesture of the book.” (Benjamin, 1992, p. 37)

If we replace “literary performance” with “architectural performance” and “book” with “building,” this paragraph could summarize this essay: show that through small ephemeral and playful projects, of an architectural and artistic nature, it is possible to influence more the active communities of determined urban environment, than through the universal gesture of building.

Cities have always been centers of artistic production and social reflection. In the 20th century, from the Dadaist urban ready-made, through the surrealist wanderings, through Benjamin's walks, through the Lyricist drift, the Situationist's playful-constructive-action and the more recent urban-art, the action of intervening in the urban space has been used as an aesthetic form of replacing the representation of the city (ideal) by 'intervening' in the city (banal). Since then, cities have been the scene of many reflections by artists and architects.

More than ever, this reflection is urgent in cities comparable to forests - a concept that we can interpret according to the urban spaces in which we live, which are

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increasingly complex and often alienating. Questions of value, use, scale, form, rhythm, time, overlap and dialogue with our inner space (our dreams, expectations, values) hostage to a digital age that simultaneously seduces and imprisons us in a virtual context that we do not dominate, creating feelings of insecurity and fear. Bauman talks about these issues in *Confiança e Medo na Cidade* (2006).

Other studies reveal that we are victims of an “attention market” that isolates us. Our relationship with digital media, public space and knowledge is mediated by the “economy of attention,” which reduces space by expanding time, while compressing it as explained by Bruno Patino in *La Civilization du poisson rouge* (2019).

Byung-Chul Han also warns of the excess of stimulus and information that we are subjected to daily, establishing a parallel between current society and wildlife. Man, like the wild animal, has to be attentive to everything around him, which is why he is losing perception skills and developing a new form of attention: *hyperattention* - a way that does not favor the contemplative attention proper to the creative and artistic minds. According to Han, this capacity can only be rescued by art and culture - propitiating “deep attention” (2014).

On the other hand, the concept of Forest, as an architectural space, offers ample stimuli for the peripheral vision, that is, the type of phenomenological vision that Pallasmaa defends to be the one that most authentically apprehends the space itself and defends us from the alienating egocentrism of the neoliberal world and digital hyper communication that separates us from real space: “A walk in the forest is invigorating and healthy thanks to the constant interaction of all types of senses; Bachelard speaks of the ‘polyphony of the senses’. The eyes collaborate with the body and the other senses. Our sense of reality is reinforced and articulated by this constant interaction. Architecture is, in the final analysis, an extension of nature in the anthropogenic sphere, providing the basis for the perception and horizon of experimentation and understanding of the world” (2011, 39).

The architect Sou Fujimoto argues that the architecture of the future will be like a forest: “Everything will harmonize in the diversity that will characterize the city of the future. This new space will emerge from the relationship between order and chaos” (2013).

The city is the privileged center from which we can assess the human condition. Since Henri Lefebvre, the hegemony of the urban over society as a whole has been problematized. Lefebvre has always argued in favor of the social construction of space, arguing that the city is not the physical expression of a set of buildings. The city is, instead, the social, sensory and emotional life that takes place between them, that is experienced in the spaces of the streets and squares, and in the significant encounters that take place in these in-between spaces.

Subjugate to certain innovative strategies, urban spaces can deepen the crisis of the city and dissociate itself from it. The question to ask is how these spaces can be socially rescued and brought back to the “city center.” Lefebvre would respond “by strengthening citizenship, by the right to urban life, transformed and renewed” (Fortuna, 13-14).

The city is an unfathomable field and there are many possibilities to act on it, from urbanism to urban design, from large-scale policies to local decisions, from architecture to sociology; there are countless players in the process of making cities. However,

the city only has meaning as a place of daily life. For centuries, the 'streets' have offered its inhabitants a public space complementary to the domestic space. The layout of the city's streets and squares was compatible with walking, because the inhabitant was, above all, a city walker.

The modern city, due to the supremacy given to transport as a fundamental element of urban design and the legacy of functionalist principles, passing through the issues of control, fear, value and alienation mentioned above, reached a point where its streets and squares expel the people rather than integrating them. They are 'centrifugal', not 'centripetal' spaces and, therefore, do not promote socialization.

We think that Art (artists and architects), refusing the commercial, mercantilist, digital, transparent and flat society (Han, 2016), acting in the textured city, with a social sense, can contribute to catalyze critical and collective energy necessary to regenerate urban space.

As social networks compromise the social dimension, putting the ego at the center - Han tells us in an interview with *El País* that despite digital *hyper communication*, loneliness and isolation increase in our society², it is urgent to encourage coexistence and social participation in the collective life of the city. Ephemeral-artistic installations can function as spaces for socializing and proximity.

Despite the moment in which we live (Covid-19 crisis) and the physical proximity is increasingly limited, leading to a loss of community experience, the 'street' is still the place where we can interact and establish community bonds, as it happened at celebrations and ancient rituals. Nancy Duxbury, in *Animation of Public Space Through the Arts*, defends the idea that the passage of artists through a city can open potential spaces for reflection on the daily use of public space.

The artist António Olaio writes, in that same book, about the importance of Art in the city: "The experience of a city can be a very complex thing, which art can help us to understand. Through the eyes of the artists, through the relationships between the visual and the conceptual, artists can reveal some complexities of the aesthetic experience of a city" (Duxbury, Olaio, 2013, 115).

People have a natural capacity to adapt to the transformation of external conditions in the urban landscape. Placed before ephemeral 'artistic objects', they are confronted with the *before* and *after*, that is, these objects create a 'friction' in the relationship with the daily space creating a critical discourse in relation to the place: "The content is produced when people pass by from a state of indifference to a state of difference," explains Eliasson (2012, 120).

Material-Atmosphere-Gravity

To understand the relationship between architecture and ephemerality, we would have to travel until the emergence of the first dwellings in which the need for mobility overlapped the durability. Vegetable materials (fabrics and wood), animals (skins and bones) and natural materials (ice or clay) built the nomadic habitat. In the transition to sedentary lifestyle, previous structures evolve. They start integrating more durable materials such as stone, then cement, followed by iron, steel, up to new technologies and contemporary materials such as plastic, sound and light. The history of architecture illustrates it, but also the whole complex genealogy of ephemeral structures for

2. See at : https://elpais.com/cultura/2020/05/15/babelia/1589532672_574169.html?ssm=FB_CC

agriculture, industry, housing (emergency), commerce for leisure and celebrations (parties, scenarios or pavilions).

We highlight, due to their high degree of experimentation and innovation, the pavilions of universal exhibitions that seek to express in a striking way the scientific, technological, artistic and political advances of a nation. Take, for example, the Philips pavilion for Expo 58 in Brussels, designed by Le Corbusier and Iannis Xenakis, whose architectural principle and shape follows the same parabolic line as the frequency curve flows used in the musical pieces *Metastasis* and *Concret PH*, by Xenakis, enabling an intimate relationship between music and architecture, conceiving an innovative and symbiotic space.

This type of ephemeral structures tests questions of lightness, speed and prefabrication in their construction processes and explores contents that are part of an artistic genealogy. The artistic pavilion that has emerged in the art in the city is a hybrid between the design disciplines and the artistic disciplines emphasizing the idea of performativity and temporality. The series of ephemeral pavilions granted by Serpentine³, self-titled “global platform for experimental projects by some of the world’s greatest architects” well illustrate this. Many of these examples point to the conversion of the ‘pavilion’ into an ‘environment’. We can also call these ambiances “architectural landscapes.”

Take, for example, the Sou Fujimoto Pavilion. It was conceived as a free-flowing social space that the author described as “transparent ground.” With this experience he wanted to investigate the possibility of fusing architecture and nature, or, how architecture can be part of nature, and what are the boundaries between the natural and the artificial⁴. This geometric ‘cloud’ expands the boundary between the interior and the exterior, inviting users to explore this undefined frontier. While it is a meeting space, it is also a ‘game’ space that invites the exploratory movement of the body over the ambiguous three-dimensional surface (constructed by cubes defined only by its metallic edges). This transparency works as an ‘atmosphere’ onto which perspective images are projected (of the palace in front and of the surrounding garden) inhabited by the participants themselves, who thus become part of this diluted ‘whole’. The propositions are several, as a child will be able to see in this environment a giant amusement park. Like Van Eyck’s playgrounds, the lack of definition of use presupposes a degree of freedom of use that attracts the user and places him in a scenario of experimental inquiry. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga observes that the difference between play and seriousness is always fluid and that “playing becomes a serious thing and a serious thing becomes a game” (1955, 10).

Modernism and its vanguards established a lineage of disciplinary reconfigurations through the exploration of concepts such as the *fourth dimension*, the *total work of art* (which will find its fulcrum in the idea of environment) and more recently the *expanded field* - or art in general that includes *play*.

The penetrability situation inherent in the formulation of a sculptural/architectural model that has been problematized since Kurt Schwitters’ *Merzbau* (introducing the spectator’s ambulation), passing through Tatlin and his *Monument to the III International* (synergetic exercise between architecture, sculpture and painting, praising the physicality of the tactile), to the *Parangolés* by Hélio Oiticica (wearable sculptures -

3. See at: <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/explore/pavilion/>

4. See at: <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/serpentine-gallery-pavilion-2013-sou-fujimoto/>

painted tissue - inspired by the organic architecture of the *favelas* and *samba*), to the *Bichos* of Lygia Clark (one of the pioneers of participatory art) until Robert Morris 'objects' that use wood or metal, soft, flexible or recycled materials, investigating qualities of weight, gravity and balance applied to his *Judson concerts* or in the exhibition *Bodyspacemotionthings*⁵ (in which the spectators were invited to manipulate huge sculptures as if they were in an amusement park), we witness the "transmutation of sculpture into another practice, immersion in the real space and, later, in the real body" (Sardo, 2017, 155-182).

The "real space," referred to by Sardo, is the public space of the city (where the *parangolés* perform), but it can also be the space of the theater as seen in Morris. The instability of the sculpture's liquid identity, poured into three-dimensionality, corporeality, cocoon or practice, reflects the "increasing fluidity between the themes of the great event of collective narratives for the themes of the small event of individual perceptive expansion, with everything that would result in restructuring the sociability contract, now centered on the negotiation of contact zones between subjectivities" (Sardo, 2017, 173).

This new possibility that is established between the work and the participant, adding up the dissolution of the 'figure-ground' relationship, claiming the peripheral vision, when taking the floor as a walking territory in the sense of Guy Debord's drift, enables another type of landscape intervention - a field of objects that do not have a focal center.

By tradition, intervention in the public space was associated with the statuary and the great monument charge of celebratory meaning. In Bauman's current *Liquid society*, public art has been replaced by this type of "landscape intervention" of ephemeral objects, materialized with light, sound, interactivity, movement and recycled or natural materials.

The phenomenon of land-art is worthy of mention in the genealogy of these ephemeral constructions and its influence is felt in contemporary artistic approaches. See the example of Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch*⁶ with the installation of giant blocks of arctic ice in prominent public places warning of climate changes: direct and tangible experience of melting arctic ice, aesthetically creating an environment that changes from solid to liquid, marking, like clockwork, the passage of time - beautiful metaphor that could illustrate Zygmunt Bauman's thinking about liquid modernity. Bauman's analysis of the consumer society that could be summarized in the axiom: "I am only if I consume," took the planet to the current emergency condition that is exalted by these works by Olafur.

Space cannot be defined if we do not include our experience of it. And individual experiences have an impact on the formation of collective spheres. I believe that this is an important socializing potential. Artistic and architectural interventions in the city can activate a state of presence, involving the public, fostering social relationships.

"In my city, for me, I'm invisible but I can see, I can see everything but me" António Olaio sings to us in an artistic assault on the city of Coimbra showing that as city dwellers it is the other that makes us what we are.

5. See at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leUiL5vzSzA>

6. See at: <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK109190/ice-watch>

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