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Three Versions of Public

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Three city-center public art projects took place in Basel and Zürich this summer, each notionally offering public gathering places. A comparison of the three reveals that dividing public and private interests is difficult, while the public itself remains an indistinct collective. This is a context in which riffing on that vagueness might be an effective strategy.





Basilea, Lara Almarcegui, Isabel Lewis and architecture studio Recetas Urbanas led by Santiago Cirugeda, Courtesy: Creative Time and Art Basel

Messeplatz Basel, early June, the week of Art Basel: The New York-based production agency Creative Time realized a program titled *Basilea* that was developed by artists Lara Almarcegui and Isabel Lewis with the architecture studio Recetas Urbanas, led by Santiago Cirugeda. Creative Time's three core values (as cited on their website) are that «art matters, artists' voices are important in shaping society, and public spaces are places for creative and free expression».[1] [/b-n-l/three-versions-of-public/pdf#T1] With their extraordinary track record of large-scale projects, it is understandable why, following a couple of previous Art Basel Miami projects, MCH Group, to which Art Basel belongs, commissioned this Swiss intervention. For several years now, Art Basel has been programming on the public Messeplatz site in front of the fair's main entrance with mixed to little success: in 2013 Tadashi Kawamata's construction with the irony-free title *Favela Dorf* was occupied and vacated only with the help of the police. In 2015, Rirkrit Tiravanija installed a communal kitchen that was to foster discussion; the press release announced it as «a large-scale work at the crossroads between the fair and the complexity of the urban fabric».[2] [/b-n-l/three-versions-of-public/pdf#T2] But as the fair and the fairgrounds form a commercial behemoth that already dominates the area during this period – the building complex even spans the public space above the Messeplatz tram stop – there is not much non-commercial urban fabric remaining to engage with. Claudia Comte's 2017 project *Now I Won*, which critic Daniel Horn described as a «breathtakingly vulgar fun-fair installation, offered throwback relational aesthetics to Basel burghers, but misfired, looking ultimately like a stage on which art collectors might play at being ordinary people.[3] [/b-n-l/three-versions-of-public/pdf#T3]

This year, *Basilea* hid in plain sight. Over its six days, a spare pavilion-like structure was gradually built with red girders by the architects; in and around it were further activities such as Lewis' daily slow-walk sessions, Tai Chi and Qigong classes, instruction in parcour and sonic interactions, plus various discussions on subjects such as creative practices in journalism or self-governance. Even the most spectacular element, the 250 tons of gravel from a Basel quarry Almarcegui deposited on site each day, could be overlooked as business

as usual in a city. *Basilea* never looked like anything more than work in progress.



Ernesto Neto, *GaiaMotherTree*, 2018, Hauptbahnhof Zürich, Fondation Beyeler, Foto: Mark Niedermann

In late June and most of July, the immense *GaiaMotherTree* by Ernesto Neto occupied the main hall of Zürich Hauptbahnhof, Switzerland's busiest transport interchange, brought there by the Fondation Beyeler. An elaborate structure woven from multicoloured cotton was suspended from existing girders in the building ceiling, with pouches of soil and spices on the ground tethered by guy ropes. Its form was tree-like with an outstretched top, narrow trunk and broader base, though despite its size, the transparency made it an unthreatening presence. Many art-savvy viewers will have known of Neto's 2017 Venice Biennial installation *Um Sagrado Lugar* (A Sacred Place) which shared many similar features. Viewers were invited to enter that space and engage in rituals performed there in the Venice opening week, but it effectively ‹exhibited› Neto's collaborators and inspiration, members of the Huni Kuin people. Viewers dashing through the Arsenale could see the Amazonians through the structure's trellis (much the same way as Olafur Eliasson's refugee collaborators were on show in the Italian Pavilion). The Huni Kuin were present in Zürich too: joined by Yawanawa and Tukano people and thirty or so other delegates from around the world, they took part in an event called *assembleia* inside *GaiaMotherTree* over the first weekend. This event opened a program that included meditation sessions, concerts, tours by art education students and workshops for children. The space had an esoteric air but promoted no obvious theory or idea. The structure was always popular, continually occupied by people sitting, sleeping and chatting in comfortable close proximity, apparently enjoying a space that enabled leisure and did not demand consumption.



Ernesto Neto, *GaiaMotherTree*, 2018, Hauptbahnhof Zürich, Fondation Beyeler, Foto: Aoife Rosenmeyer



Pavel Althamer, *OWOW*, Münsterhof Kunst 2018, Foto: Aoife Rosenmeyer

A month later, Zürich's Münsterhof became home to Pawel Althamer's *OWOW*, a commission from the City of Zürich's KiöR (Art in Public Space) working group. Lasting just short of a month, this was a small, experimental project that Althamer had proposed as part of the ongoing framework study financed by the city's Tiefbauamt (the public works department) that looked into ways to use the Münsterhof as a ‹culture square› (Kulturplatz). Earlier this summer, the piazza had also been densely, though just briefly, occupied by the Festspiele Zürich's family day on June 17. Althamer's *OWOW* was made up of a few rudimentary structures: two sleeping compartments (which could not, by law, be slept in); a studio (a materials store and covered worktable); and a fire-pit. Found materials and tree trunks accrued to be turned into artworks. *OWOW* followed on the heels of a similar, though more spectacular, work titled *Windbreakers* outside Zach?ta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw earlier this summer, an open-air sculpting workshop using trees felled in recent storms.



Pavel Althamer, *OWOW*, Münsterhof Kunst 2018, Foto: Peter Baracchi / KiöR

In Zürich, Althamer and/or fellow artists would appear at various moments and work in this space, and the public were (in theory) invited to join in. In describing the project, the city highlight two key references: firstly, to the historic guildhalls that face onto the Münsterhof,

which Althamer sought to complement with a temporary artists' guild, though to many of us these established guilds are bastions of exclusivity and nepotism rather than institutions easily compatible with an open-access project. Secondly, Althamer cites «Obszar Wspólny / Obszar W?asny» (Common Space / Private Space), a phrase artist and teacher Grzegorz Kowalski used for a series of lectures at the beginning of the 1980s at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, where Althamer was a student.[4] [/b-n-l/three-versions-of-public/pdf#T4] *OWOW* evolved into a non-hierarchical creative practice which emphasized non-verbal communication. A little digging reveals that Althamer's 2018 intervention continues a tradition of working in public and collaboratively that can be traced even further back to Oskar Hansen, one of Kowalski's teachers.[5] [/b-n-l/three-versions-of-public/pdf#T5] Furthermore, Althamer and other fellow students, notably Arthur Z?mijewski, have previously mined the idea in projects such as the exhibition *[s]election.pl* at the Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, projects which have illuminated differences in how participants behave inside and outside the protected environment of an art school, and the influence of Kowalski's guiding principle that *OWOW* would not accommodate destructive behavior. In a brief conversation on site, Althamer encouraged the public (i.e. me) to think less about context (say, the Trois-Pommification of the neighborhood) and get stuck in.[6] [/b-n-l/three-versions-of-public/pdf#T6]He promoted creative action that pre-empts any consideration of financing or ownership and suggested that artists might be modern-day shamans leading their audiences.



Pavel Althamer, *OWOW*, Münsterhof Kunst 2018, Foto: Peter Baracchi / KiöR

Zürich’s main station is not, strictly speaking, a public location, but it is owned by SBB, the Swiss federal railways, a corporation owned in full by the Swiss Confederation and, by extension, the Swiss people, so it could be defined as public. The Münsterhof in Zürich and

the Messeplatz in Basel are both centrally located public spaces. The Fondation Beyeler, which brought Neto's project to the station, operates as a foundation funded by the Beyeler Foundation, the Hansjörg Wyss Foundation, sponsors and donors, public funds from the Cantons of Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft and the local municipality Riehen as well as sales of their (expensive) tickets. At the press conference launching *GaiaMotherTree*, Sam Keller, the Beyeler director, announced that in addition to lottery funds, sponsorship, funds from the City and Canton of Zürich and services in kind from various partner organizations, 20% of the costs remained to be raised – and would be done so through a crowd-funding platform provided by ebay. You could say that the project even democratized cultural patronage. Art Basel meanwhile funded *Basilea*, as the project is an off-shoot of a commercial enterprise permitted to temporarily occupy a public site; numerous agencies and organizations assisted with the project but did not sponsor it, while volunteers were invited to assist in building Recetas Urbanas' structure. Althamer's project is a fraction of the scale of the other two and, as mentioned, funded by the City of Zürich.

All events were freely accessible, though strongly influenced by their specific contexts: during Art Basel, the Messeplatz in Basel is always busy, and visitors to the fair have countless different activities on offer at any given time, from fairs and exhibitions to talks and happenings, and fear of missing out is almost a given. To stop and devote time to any discussion or performance here requires determination. Neto's installation was open for a longer period, though the number of people allowed inside at any given time was limited to 50 by fire authorities, making for long queues of disappointed people outside *assembleia*, for example. Althamer's platform was always open to some extent, but required an artist be present to open up and activate it, and in this respect the actors proved willful, often starting their work days around 11 am, long after other city populations.



Basilea, Lara Almarcegui, Isabel Lewis and architecture studio Recetas Urbanas led by Santiago Cirugeda, Courtesy: Creative Time and Art Basel

Who wanted or authorized these projects? Let's assume (and it's a big assumption) that producing public art projects is, per se, a good thing. That still doesn't entirely explain why these projects were realized. For Art Basel, Messeplatz projects have, for several years,

seemed like an itch the fair had to scratch, the need to present a public face and offer a public experience outside the main fair, even though activities like the annual Parcours exhibition also create connections with the city with reasonable success. The Fondation Beyeler, which can operate independently as long as it obtains the approval of its board, chose the Hauptbahnhof as a busy site that fulfilled Neto's project's requirement for cover, while the artist approved of the location at a transport hub, which was consistent with a structure made by countless knots and connections. The SBB then granted the Fondation permission in the same manner as it allows Christmas markets or volleyball competitions to fill the space, so Zürich's main station became a short-term satellite of the Basel institution. Althamer's project was initiated, approved and realized within the City of Zürich, acting on behalf of Zürich's citizens. The motivation for this project is the most transparent and arguably the most altruistic, part of the initiative to bring cultural activity to, and presumably enliven, the square.

Unlike major permanent art projects (the *Nagelhaus* project proposed for Escher Wyss Platz in Zürich comes to mind), public or parliamentary approval was not sought before these projects appeared, and, once installed, people in both cities could generally choose to engage with or bypass them.[7] [/b-n-l/three-versions-of-public/pdf#T7] Both the Messeplatz and the train station site are places huge numbers of people traverse: those interested could linger, while those not interested were unlikely to be lingering anyway. The Münsterhof, in comparison, is a site the city encourages people to spend time in, as evinced by the movable seats prominently present, though beyond the restaurants, not many people do. There may be more than one reason for this: Do the tours that pass through have tight schedules to maintain? Is the clientele for the adjoining boutiques, such as Issey Miyake, not a group that sits around in public? Does the location require more animation? Or is the pristinely renovated plaza an exposed and uncomfortable place to sit? The city might usefully define who they want to spend time there.



Pavel Althamer, *OWOW*, Münsterhof Kunst 2018, Foto: Peter Baracchi / KiöR

Zygmunt Bauman writes about cities as places where competing interests and dynamics meet. [8] [/b-n-l/three-versions-of-public/pdf#T8] Particularly relevant here is the tension manifested between power, which Bauman describes as virtual, mobile and global, and

politics, linked to the local. Cities now accommodate two separate tiers of population: an upper tier connected to extra-territorial networks; and a lower tier whose lives are territorially circumscribed. «The people of the ‹upper tier› do not apparently belong to the place they inhabit. Their concerns lie (or rather float) elsewhere.»[9] [/b-n-l/three-versions-of-public/pdf#T9] Art Basel's programming of Messeplatz and the Fondation Beyeler's Zürich outpost are projects that epitomize floating global activity by powerful major players (the latter perhaps also the Beyeler's attempt to set sail). Their activities are transitory, relate little to their sites and show no interest in ongoing engagement with it. The immobile cities, meanwhile, are glad to borrow the glamour and cachet of major cultural players as proof of a high quality of urban life.

Temporary site-specific public projects offer their authors many advantages; they are allowed to only work for, or speak to, certain users of a space for a short time. The imperative to cater to everyone does not exist; any ‹public› art project has a multifarious and unpredictable audience. Temporary projects are an opportunity to try out different positions on a spectrum ranging from a single author's statement to a collective, interactive creative act. This is true of most artworks, but in public there is greater responsibility to involve the self-selecting audience. Althamer occupied an ambiguous position on the scale. I don't know if he had seen *Um Sagrado Lugar* in Venice with its questionable presentation of Neto's collaborators, and if that influenced his exhibitionism (a word that inevitably sounds judgmental) in Zürich.[10] [/b-n-l/three-versions-of-public/pdf#T10]Althamer ‹played› an artist determined not to be cowed by his surroundings, while nonetheless working with those same surroundings. He proposed collaboration but remained ringmaster. As the project drew to a close, tree trunks had been carved, paintings installed inside the shelters and other sculptural works arranged, but the prevailing air of disorder remained. Over the final weekend, a street artist was invited to the square to create huge soap bubbles, with which he seemed to have had more luck engaging the public than the artists. One of Althamer's team from Poland expressed her frustration that few people passing by had approached them or become involved. The project was, thus, a success: it contrasted starkly with its tidy site and illustrated the lack of public in a public space designed to meet the needs of surrounding commerce.

Was Althamer's naïvety a deliberate strategy enabled by the temporary nature of the project? Amnesia or forgetfulness were ingredients of Creative Time's project, which embraced the dispersal of attention by the fair maelstrom. Rather than trying to stop passers-by in their tracks, the interventions crept up on them. Lara Almarcegui was able to heap tons of gravel and create a stealth monument, which almost tried to be invisible – playing perhaps on Robert Musil's statement that monuments are just that – yet made a simple and profound statement about time, geology and site.

These projects certainly illustrate some of the power dynamics in a contemporary city: The Fondation Beyeler creates a pleasant space for commuters but it equally establishes and amplifies its own global brand.[11] [/b-n-l/three-versions-of-public/pdf#T11] At the Münsterhof, the city of Zürich is hopefully beginning to understand the effects of an overheated retail-space market. Bauman saw the city as a place of potential: «The training ground where the means to placate and disperse that uncertainty and insecurity [induced by global capitalism] can be experimented with, tried out and eventually learned and adopted.» [12] [/b-n-l/three-versions-of-public/pdf#T12] The high-profile Beyeler project placated its public with a non-confrontational chill-out zone, an unthreatening and irrelevant intervention that allowed engagement but no collaboration. Temporary public art projects could be a means of dispersing uncertainty, but to have some lasting effect they need be curated with an actual, potentially active public rather than the organizing institutions in mind. Who are the artists working for?

[1] Creative Time website: http://creativetime.org/about/
[2] https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/29383/do-we-dream-under-the-same-sky/
[3] Daniel Horn, «Art Basel», in *Art Agenda*, June 17, 2017, http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/art-basel-7/
[4] Press release of the City of Zürich: «‹Zunfthaus› auf dem Münsterhof», August 7, 2018, https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/ted/de/index/departement/medien/medienmitteilungen/2018/august/180807a.html
[5] Akiko Kasuya, «An Open Design Theory for Society: From Oskar Hansen's "Open Form" to Grzegorz Kowalski's "Common Space, Private Space"», paper given at the Second Asian Conference of Design History and Theory, September 1–2, 2017, Tokyo, http://www.acdht.com/download/2017/08kasuya.pdf
[6] Trois Pommes is a chain of high-end luxury goods shops that dominate the old town around the Münsterhof and have in recent years displaced other businesses with lower profit margins.
[7] The *Nagelhaus* was a proposal by Thomas Demand in collaboration with Caruso St John architects which won a competition organized by the City of Zürich. The SVP party initiated a referendum on the project; a small majority of Zürich voters chose not to realize the artwork. https://www.carusostjohn.com/projects/nagelhaus/
[8] Zygmunt Bauman, «City of Fears, City of Hopes», 2003, http://www.arss.ro/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/z.bauman_city-of-fear.pdf
[9] Ibid., p. 16.
[10] A more apt counterpoint might be Joseph Beuys's 1974 performance *I like America and America likes Me*.
[11] Assisted in this by press coverage such as national broadcaster SRF's portrait of Sam Keller: https://www.srf.ch/sendungen/reporter/sam-und-sein-traum
[12] Bauman, ibid., p. 38.

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