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Pieces of Informality

The question of how much should be planned and fixed and how much should be left open for adjustments, interpretation and improvisation is omnipresent in the arts. This essay does not intend to resolve that conflict, neither does it claim a revolutionary breakthrough in this probably never ending debate. However, it will take a walk in between the fields of performance and dance to show how their creative processes could inform the planning arts.

What if the planning arts let go of representational techniques and instead worked with performative tools? What if concrete plans became more like generative scores? What if new spaces emerged: *informalities?* How could we foster these *dynamic, constantly performing political spaces that allow for conflict, movement and change*?

To describe a set of tools which generate informalities the essay will analyse the performance *Explosion of Silence* by Claudia Bosse. These methodological instruments will be revised and negotiated with common contemporary dance practices and texts by the architects and architectural theorists Sanford Kwinter, Pablo Molestina and Andreas Ruby.

Performing Political Space

In their essay *Operative Landscapes* Pablo Molestina and Andreas Ruby plead for continuity in the architectural production of urban spaces. "If architecture is conceived more according to the processual logic of landscape transformation, then it can no longer revolve around the injection of an object in a field but operates like a field itself […]" [1]

Rather than representing, informalities are performing space. They cannot be planned through, but their grounds can be prepared. The fields can be organized, directions can be timed, forces can be composed. In other words, they can be choreographed. Always shifting between different layers of conceptualizing and implementing, choreography is both the planned and the improvised. A constant, but discontinuous negotiation of elements in space and space itself. Choreography is changing space-time through movements. As these changes are only perceivable by difference, choreography inevitably embraces dissent. Therefore, choreography is always political, fostering the informal.

On October 19th, 2017, at 17.00 the performance *Explosion of Silence* by the contemporary theatre director Claudia Bosse (theatercombinat) made use of these choreographic principles. For sixty minutes *a performative monument* emerged at Praterstern, Vienna. It consisted of the participants, a group of more than 80 people of

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[1] "Once landscape is liberated from the burden of representation, it can start to unfold its performative qualities. […] one generates the links, sets the conditions and the form will be a resultant, not an a priori like in a simple compositional exercise.

It becomes the task of an architect to organize the field and not to predetermine how it will look like and how it will be used." (Molestina, Pablo; Ruby, Andreas: *Operative Landscapes*, Transform, No. 2, 1998.)

diverse origins, different ages and ways of life, but also of the visitors, and the surrounding space itself. In this performance, public space was understood as a place for constant negotiations. Through the actions of the participants and the visitors these negotiations were conducted. Multiple demands and narratives created gaps and overlaps in urban space, thus they generated tensions, leading to discussions.

Informalities are spaces of discussion. They are stirring up the old hegemonies. Informalities are creating discussions. They are performing politically by questioning traditions and rules. Informalities are political space, and therefore, they are vital for cities. As public negotiations of dissent can take place there, these spaces of tension and friction allow for movement. Within their inconsistencies and discontinuities experiments can happen; spaces of change can arise.

Created by discussions political space is itself creating discussions. Consent cannot be the outcome, as consent does not resolve conflict. On the contrary, it suppresses difference. Behind the white paint of conformity, heterogeneity is hidden. Enclosed rather than included, dynamic movements are pressed into a system that seems to be static. However, compression only accelerates the movement within, it heats up the system, which will eventually lead to explosion. The planning arts must generate informalities, we must leave space for dissent, we must allow discussions and negotiations to take place. We must give them space, otherwise we will explode.

Therefore, creative planning must let go of formalities. Homogeneity does not exist any more, and neither does a closed system. The world consists of interlocking, dynamic and complex systems. We must embrace them and their differences. We must build up momentum and sustain movements, we must leave gaps in between because every gap opens up a space.

Scoring Momentum

Instead of plans most contemporary performance arts use scores as notations to create, document and communicate their works. They are conceived and used in various ways.

In *Explosion of Silence* the score served as the common communication basis. It was worked on, and re-adjusted, during and in between the rehearsals. The score became the underlying essence of multiple ideas within the *silent chorus*:

"you construct a network with the others
all of you stand in different directions
you construct a body together not a circle
your connections cross the space in different directions" [2]

One by one the network of participants, of nodes and junctions assembled. The body of the chorus formed, and became a heterogeneous unity, holding differences, tensions, energy and momentum for sixty minutes on site, but much longer in the bodies of the participants.

Another way, found in contemporary dance, is to propose starting points, sources, ideas or structures from which the dancers generate the movements themselves. In this development process the choreographer selects and modifies some of them, co-creating with the dancers. For the resulting piece some movements are fixed, whereas other passages are left open for improvisation. Through this process a

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[2] Extracts of the score; in Bosse, Claudia:
http://www.theatercombinat.com/projekte/silentchorus/explosionderstille_en.htm

heterogeneous, elastic network is created. The basic structure of the fabric is set, while it still remains flexible enough to be re-adjusted by the dancers, the choreographer, the space, in a word, by the context it is set in.

Scores foster the emergence of momentum, which is in turn producing informalities. The planning arts could gain knowledge from this way of working by recognizing the quality of momentum, which can produce something unexpected, but powerful, in the very moment of doing, *performing*. Needless to say, this is only possible if the dancers and the choreographer trust on each others´ competences and skills. Or, translated to the planning arts, this cannot be carried out without a well-functioning communication between planners and skilled craftsmen.

Another important factor is time. Without time, and thus the space for processing, such developments will never happen. However, in recent years the planning arts were more and more occupied with representing their work. Within tight deadlines many hours are spent on the final presentation models and rendered images to make a strong first impression on competition jurors (who are themselves working under time pressure), rather than investing more time in the actual planning and performing process. For the sake of a project the focus should shift again to the development, away from images, which are mere products to be consumed, and towards scores, plans or maps, which are processes, and thus themselves producing.

Moments of Disturbance

As mentioned above, the political is formed by difference, within in-between spaces informalities occur. They result from a contra-position of parts. Informalities come into existence in between their boundaries, constituted by material forms and by immaterial context and events. Therefore, they are always unstable.

Instability is the source of change, according to the theorist Sanford Kwinter, who studied interlocking complex systems: "change drives every moment and physical arrangement to pass out of phase with itself, to become something different, to disaggregate and to become momentarily free to enter into new alliances."[3] But what do these moments of freedom, before the old arrangement becomes something different, before it enters into new structures, consist of?

In *Explosion of Silence* the participants built the body of the *silent chorus*, an interruption, and a counter-rhythm to the busyness of their surroundings. The chorus became a seed of disturbance by interrupting the functionalities and routines of the everyday, creating a gap. In between its edges, the body of the chorus became a body of resistance:

> "the chorus is the oldest political-aesthetic praxis
> of our western european culture.
> the chorus is never product but always process
> of manifold conflicts, dissonances, differences."[4]

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[3] Kwinter, Sanford: *African Genesis (A Presentation)*, Assemblage, No. 36, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1998.

[4] Extract of *chorus is danger:*
> "[…] chorus is a space for negotiations.[...]
> chorus is a framework that grapples with itself.
> chorus is the confrontation with a societal potential.
> chorus is a collective potential."

The moment of the leap is another example of what happens in those ruptures before the old arrangement becomes something different. Its momentum goes beyond figuration, it has no overall form. The jump is already at another place, always happening in the in between. The informality of the leap is holding a difference, hence it is performing political space.

However, as we never know all the layers of a complex system, such a moment of disturbance cannot be materialized. Its manifestations are merely translations. The informality itself is immaterial. It is in a constant process of figuration, defiguration and refiguration. This however, cannot be an excuse not to work with it at all. We need to find new ways of working with these processes without using a single static frame or situation. Here again, we should take a look at the arts of performance and dance, as their handling of time and timing is one of the key elements in the creative process.

Dilation, Contraction and the Difficulties of Translations

In the performing arts, a passage within a piece is figured out by treating a bigger section at once, instead of concentrating on a single static moment within the movement. By contracting and dilating, we can investigate what it consists of, manipulate its ingredients and change how it is perceived by finding the "right" speed and timing.

In the example of *Explosion of Silence* the body of the chorus stepped into formation with the intention to bring of the busiest squares in Vienna to silence. Even though it did not achieve to bring the space to silence completely, the *silent chorus* still slowed its surroundings down.

"stay still and imagine your stillness is staying still the city

stay still and understand your stillness as a counter-rhythm in space" [5]

By placing themselves as a counter-rhythm, the participants dilated time and space through the act of performance. Although the bodies of the chorus were standing still most of the time, some precise movements – contractions – emphasized the dilation even more.

However, we encounter a principal problem of working with dilation in dance, specifically in the movement of leaping. Dancers need force, an impulse and a certain speed to be able to jump. A leap might be analysed by filming with a slow motion camera. The contractions in the muscles, the tensions that are built up and the relaxations in other parts will be made visible, but a jump will never be performed in slow motion. Dancers will never learn these movements by practising them in a slower pace, as they only get more difficult. Some movements are practically not feasible without a corresponding speed and momentum – contraction – and therefore, they have to be worked on in real time, being performed live.

This example illustrates the difficulties of translating operations from one field into another. As these translations include many transformations one has to be aware

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in Bosse, Claudia:
http://www.theatercombinat.com/projekte/silentchorus/explosionderstille_en.htm

[5] Ibid. Extract of the score.

"[...] a basis a spectrum a composition a conflict
stay still
but stay moved
in your stillness"

of while using them. On the other hand, this example also shows that there is a reason why performance arts are performed and practised live. They are worked on in the process, they only come into existence in the very moment of doing.

Even though there are difficulties in working with time and timing, as it demands practice and precision, dilation and contraction are vital tools. Sanford Kwinter recognizes the importance, and impact of those tools in music composition: "Dilation and ralenti move us toward the physical, the logical, and the perceptible (and thus apprehensible), while contraction moves us toward the higher, more intensive forms of computation [...] – toward the invisibilities, the fevers, and the mysteries of matter and autonomous life."*6* These tools enable the development of new movements, phrases and rhythms, thus creating new spaces. Live arts constantly change the space around themselves, just like life does, just like geography, landscapes, and cities do as well. The planning arts should as well be aware of their position within a dynamic environment. They must move us towards both the perceptible and the invisibilities, the informalities. But how could the planning arts evoke the same thrills, when we have learnt already that it is impossible to translate a tool directly from the performance arts to the planning arts? How could they induce forces in dynamic processes?

Perceiving Rhythms and Responses

If the movements of dilation and contraction are periodically recurring they appear as patterns. These rhythms are found in dance, in music, in architecture, in cities, in poetry and nature, and almost any other field. Rhythms emerge from recurring movements and breaks in between, hence, they are based on multiplicity and difference. They help us to perceive how things work. They give us a sense of familiarity, as they facilitate recognition. In this way, rhythms stabilize dynamic processes, by giving a certain perceptible order to them.

Investigating how multiple rhythms interlock, Sanford Kwinter states: "One rhythm always determines how we hear or apprehend another (they do not stand alone) [...]; they pick one another out, cut across one another, focus one another, and make one another be "heard." Rhythms are responsive and reciprocal. It is a new type of composition in architecture or in design in general, when a rhythm may be relaxed or subdued in order that it may be heard all the better."[7]

The responsive and reciprocal quality of rhythms is often neglected in the field architecture and planning, where rhythms are frequently reduced to mere static patterns, without activity. Rhythms however, have the potential to bring life to structures. They let otherwise static elements breath, and pulsate in different velocities.

In the practice of performance arts, the challenging topic of multiple rhythms is often faced in exercise and rehearsals. One approach is to train our own perception to shift the focus from one rhythm to another. Here again, we need time because perceiving and analysing rhythms is a process of learning.

The work on *Explosion of Silence* included an intense training of perception for the participants. During rehearsal workshops they gathered to learn different

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[6] Here, Sanford Kwinter is referring to African cross-rhythmic music, concluding that "Design, like music, must carry us in both directions [the logical and the fevers] at once." Kwinter, Sanford: African Genesis (A Presentation), Assemblage, No. 36, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1998.

[7] Referring to design projects by Lindy Roy, Sanford Kwinter investigated multiple interlocking rhythms found in the area of the Kalahari Desert, Southern Africa. Their research shows how the rhythms of nature, wickerwork, music and dance integrate without merging together. Ibid.

techniques of guiding their awareness and their focus: Perceiving the rhythms of their own body, mainly their breathing, to build a strong base within themselves that helps to keep concentrated, but also the rhythms of their surroundings, the noise of cars, trams, bikes, pedestrians.

*"*you are aware of your muscles and the different rhythms of you body
you observe your rhythms
you observe the rhythms of the city and the other bodies around you" [8]

By observing the participants became aware of how these rhythms in the city are experienced and and how they can be manipulated. While at the same time they raised their awareness of how their own bodies relate to all these movements and rhythms. They experienced and started to comprehend how their bodies relate to the bodies of the others and to the dynamic space in the city, and finally how to establish relations, informalities, within these constant negotiations.

The planning arts could make use of the responsive and reciprocal quality of rhythms to enrich their compositions. Perhaps their task is not only to inject new rhythms, but also to prepare elements which catalyse and filter those rhythms, which should be focused. In doing so, in between contractions and breaks, rhythms can turn noise into perceptible informalities.

Figuring Pieces

In *Explosion of Silence* the chorus becomes a composition becomes a conflict becomes an informality in the city. Disturbing the urban fabric like both a hole and a patch in worn clothing, this piece is contradiction and deviation. It is floating somewhere in between, untouchable, and still perceptible. This *performative monument* exemplifies the basic principles of scores, momentum, timing, dilation and contraction, rhythms, and conflict – a set of tools to generate informalities.

These tools are used in *pieces*, as works of the performance arts are mostly referred to. A piece is just a part of something. In the full sense of the word, a piece can never be completed. Each piece is an approximation of something greater, an extract (or a section in architectural terms) of a whole. By processing these pieces, we can get rid of the overloading pressure of producing the whole at once. Pieces invite tryouts, essays, tests and experiments, and failures, but in the very moment of doing, of *performing*, they become something. Sometimes they become more than themselves, and they create informalities around themselves. Sometimes another piece has to be added, and sometimes a piece within the piece has to be taken away. But all these movements are happening. Pieces are constantly in the process of figuration, defiguration and refiguration.

Perhaps we cannot translate performative tools into the planning arts, but they can inform our way of working. Perhaps we cannot translate those techniques directly, but we can still gain knowledge by practicing them. And perhaps this process of learning is the most valuable thing in the end. And perhaps I need to correct myself:

We do not have to generate informalities, but pieces of informality.

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[8] Extract of the score. Bosse, Claudia:
http://www.theatercombinat.com/projekte/silentchorus/explosionderstille_en.htm

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