

Aspanggründe by Yves Mettler

The Phenomenon

A piece of land which through the game of history found itself unused since WWII, next to the center of a European capital, Vienna. It's 490'000m² big. One third is easily accessible since the railway from the center to the airport has been renovated around 2000. It is also the former plot where the train station was that was used for deportation by the Nazis during WWII.

Two-third of it is a real wasteland: pioneer plants grow nearly uncontrolled, restless fertilizers of the soil. Barracks have been built in the 19th century, but the ground never got excavated. The plot is cut off from the city's organized life through a continuous wall covered with big advertisement boards. On one of the four sides it is contiguous to a strip of research facilities of the technical university. Along the wall, one entrance only is provided for cars, as a very small part has been fitted out as a paying parking lot controlled by an automatic barrier. Through this hole the full plot is accessible.

City cleaning

The consistent development of "city cleaning" processes in Europe's post-industrial cities closes more and more the possibility of the constitution of a physically acknowledgeable public sphere where collective exchange can take place, where otherness can be met. Those processes produce a standardized subjectivity through the reduction of allowed actions and manifestations, taking a behavioral control over those yet called public spaces.

The city's violence is the authority's scheme of dispatching legitimate and illegitimate violence from and to its inhabitants.

This transforms the urban experience into total boredom, where the individual subjectivity is reduced to a series of reflex actions, squeezing its empathy and desire for exchange into consumerist standards. Passivity is the main state of mind, and so any active or deviant activity appears as frightening or suspect. It appears to me that the urban experience, and moreover the public space, is severely lacking protocols and readiness for singular subjectivities to emerge and getting public. The individual remains stuck in mainstream culture.

Following this I would like to point out the long development of the urban environment and its repeated descriptions from Baudelaire, Eliot and Benjamin, the feelings of de-realization, until Guattari's call of forming groups, nested in the territories of existential realities, but opening a narrative territory where the singularities can find an expression.

Basically, and here not further developed, this call seems to me a possible exit window out of a cultural critique based on an anti position, responding diagonally to the culture of fear and violence growing since 10 years. My interest is to observe and produce involutive narratives where the normalized and the extraordinary experience of the urban and daily surrounding gets blurred into a new perception of one's familiar environment. Like Europe Squares, nearly domestic animals or engineer's building, wastelands are some of my concrete fields of reality I'm researching for my work.

I chose the Aspanggründe abstractly from my studio to be my anchor point to the real, out of the exhibition space I'd been invited to show in. I knew the place only as a blind spot as I lived next to it some years ago. I remembered the smaller part being a huge building site of the renovation of the railway tracks running to the airport. The other part was completely obliterated by the wall of advertisements.

The Experience

The excursion took place right after a happening, that I organized, had failed. It doomed by my own disbelief in it as soon as I lost any hope for having the conditions that I wanted, which were: snow, a lot of snow. After two hours of resisting and trying things out with the few who came, I gave up: Obviously everybody had better things to do than wasting their precious time for this nonsense. The happening was supposed to be staged on the more accessible part of the plot.

As I came to Vienna especially for this happening on this plot, I wanted to get the most out of this place. So I decided to go for a walk on the hidden side, encouraged and accompanied by one friend of the group who had time to spend outside on this gloomy Sunday afternoon of March.

As we got into the area through the parking lot, we started to look around. I felt myself soon confident in the surrounding, recognizing the plants which are growing there as being the same that I found some years ago on a residual lot I investigated extensively, next to the airport of Geneva. From this point on I connected strongly the plot to the issues addressed in the project in Geneva, Les Roncières, about housing planning. It seemed like my memory threw a net of images and expectations, predetermining what has to be seen. With these issues on my mind, we walked deeper into the land, not imagining a second what we were about to stumble on.

Behind the first rows of bushes exploding the tar ground of the parking lot, we bumped into a natural wall of spikes. Going along it, we eventually found a path cut in it. We entered the wasteland, sucked in by curiosity and the exciting fear of meeting something unknown or monstrous, like stumbling over a corpse.

Back in the city, back to life.

It was so exciting to speculate about those traces of an organization we didn't know about. An organization separated from the one we were from. How did this happen? Did we just explore a rejected piece of land as homeland for the rejected? How could it emerge? What are the deals with the outside, if there were some? Is the authority just ignoring this life here? What was the status of this open-air squat? How can such a large piece of land be occupied without having nothing to declare? We were in a private garden ignored by its owner. It was no one's or everybody's private garden... In our fantasy. It was only our own safe social situation that allowed us to dream – daydream – about a free land. We were the living dead from the administrated world stumbling into a hidden land of unimaginable rules.

It's from our perspective of integrated individuals in a (globalized, bio-politicized, controlled, digitized, consumerist, capitalist) society that we could suddenly imagine something through this unprepared encounter with a piece of seemingly unregulated land, or at least, not by the same rules than those we knew.

If we had known before where we would go, what would have changed? Probably we would have gotten into a kind of jungle exploration mode, kind of Indiana Jones, to prevent our own exposure, camouflaging our origins. Here I want to point out the sudden desire that expanded in this unprepared event: a fantastic stream of imaginary forces unleashed, released from the usual, the daily restraints cut loose by surprise.

Obviously, in the aftermath, the first thing to state is the ongoing danger of romanticizing the event. The life we encountered there is limited, de-skilled, marginalized, grungy and surviving with a dark grey economy through opportunities left by the ruling society. A stuck life which can hardly ever be taken over as a model. It is there and there is nothing to be done about it, or with it – it's not a material to be commodified. It's out there, although fully depending on the surrounding society that lets it exist, more or less. This in turn opens the question why it is tolerated by the city.

The zone, even after fifty years, is still considered to be in a temporary state. So anything happening there is considered too, to be only temporary, and therefore inconsistent. Nothing can expand and develop – and that's how the authority will keep things. The wall around it showed me how easily huge areas can be cut off from the public sphere, from the city's consciousness. The zone had no existence.

Another factor that influences directly the zone's ecosystem is the weather: The harsh winter destroys and devastates everything that has been built with poor means over the summer. One could then speculate about a little help given by police raids turning down any solid structure in order to keep the cycle as low as possible. The whole zone's ecology is liquified to the extreme: a secret, tacit deal tolerating only temporary structures, leaving the wild dwellers evaluate how far they can solidify and invest in a structure before it's considered too solid and becomes a threatening parallel structure, maybe even becoming visible. Their invisibility and maintained precarious state of organization is their token for having the right to live there. It cannot develop into another way of life; it cannot become a parallel visible system with its own economy/ecology. I cannot not make the parallel to the principle of a Temporary Autonomous Zone, although this one works on a very low level of individual survival and minimal collective tolerance. It's probably not even developing into a gang. Rather a low-nutrient broth, homeopathically controlled.

Insofar it remains more within the horizon of an urban and social wasteland. Space, time and lives are wasted in a never ending loophole, waiting to be integrated in the city by a superimposed planning system. The discovery of the zone leaves me with a very ambivalent feeling, where richness and poverty clash in a disturbing way, questioning which side is which. A cynical situation of which I'm a co-producer and co-actor, who by chance and involuntarily, stepped over an invisible limit.

The zone is basically condemned. There is a state master plan since 2000 and a huge housing project has been drawn three years ago. The work will start this summer. It's an absolutely conventional family housing project with office and shopping spaces, with a green label for having zero energy wasting buildings. An ecological overlay that covers a totally 19th century model of time, activity and social division. Urban life seems doomed to the repetition and extension of a model established once during the industrial revolution 150 years ago, where individuals are addressed separately through categories such as personal income, family status and consumerist habits.

The encounter with the zone is also an experience of immaterial and unusable richness: possibilities, imaginary desire got awakened, projective energy got raised from nowhere, from deep in myself – and my first reflex was to say, I have to do something out of this. Later I directly linked this reflex with the now common process of gentrification following artistic interventions or artist communities presence, which in turn have real and dramatic consequences for the people living in these margins (the black community in Soho, street kids in Cairo, etc...), as the visibility produced by the artists got instrumentalised by the city's authorities and their attached speculators.

So the zone is a space kept tight, where imagination and projections are held back in a net of plans, laws and regulations. It's a restrained space where desire and ideas could have spread like those spiky hostile bushes that grow and fertilize the soil until another form emerges, in accordance with the local conditions and resources. The area's potentiality is kept under control until an enlightening process of normalization sweeps over and transforms the zone so deeply that even its memory will be erased. Archeologists are already looking forward on the excavations in the preserved underground, ready to extract and archive the expected traces of past life. The history of the roman empire enforced again, along with some warlords burial sites, while the contemporary city's development will suffer another obliteration.

Aspanggründig

"[...] , but worse yet, as it would become evident soon thereafter, that the abstract Sublime and the minimalist aesthetic would merge almost without resistance precisely with those architectural coding systems whose strategies and avowed goals were precisely the annihilated display of control and power in the corporate spaces of the administrated world."

B. Buchloh, in Isa Genzken, Jeder braucht mindestens ein Fenster, 1992, Walter König Verlag.

The happening Broken Guns finally let something happen. And even if I regret not having taken my friends to this place, which would have highly stimulated the whole group, I still feel like having been taken much further than what I expected.

The space I found ideally antagonizes the space in which I'm invited to show, a former bank hosting a temporary art program: two spaces totally excluding each other. A discovery that leaves me quite ambivalent about what I can tell and do about a reality that is rich in itself and for its secret: A despised way of life planned to disappear in favor of a highly standardized and efficient one. In front of the exhibition space is a church. While the bank became an art space, the church opened its crypt as homeless overnight shelter over the winter. It's quite a tough place. During the building of the show I saw them hanging around between the bank and the church and I thought that the zone might be the summer residency for some of them.

I started with the idea to create an event on a piece of land largely forgotten, in order to build a link to a reality from the non-specificity of the exhibition space. But the real spatial occupation, the wasteland's life overwhelmed the motive of a sudden artificial occupation, the happening. And it is impossible to connect with it without undermining its reality. I need an exologism! I don't want to document this place, I have to treat it like a private sphere, which you can't enter without intruding its intimacy. But at the same time its existence is a blatant counter statement to what is planned to be built there, so limited in terms of inventivity and urban renewal. There is an ambivalence that I want to keep and support, a contradiction that I'd like to keep real.

The title „Aspanggründig“ directly refers to the area, so its location or origin is revealed from the very beginning, and informs immediately the visitor about a blind spot, an absent yet real place outside. But the name is transformed into an adjective and so becomes a quality of the phenomenon. From now on anything in the show will be connected to it. The basic strategy for the show however won't be documentation. I'm

looking for a mean to build a double bind between the two spaces where both exclude each other, both being inaccessible for the other. It's about a transfer being real on both sites at once.

As I already said, I link the Aspanggründe strongly with the Les Roncières work in Geneva, especially through the vegetation. The blackberry bushes are strange plants: early pioneers able to implant in hostile environments, they have two modes of propagation and a logic of self-fertilizing while giving shelter to many small animals. They also allow other plants to grow under them. They finally disappear as soon as one or the other locally adapted tree species come out and throw their shadow on the bushes.

With a single violent gesture, mimicking the future caterpillars clearing the site for building, I clear the pioneer bushes and transfer them to the exhibition space in order to make it unusable in return. A frontal exclusion giving view onto a mess structured by the spiky arches. Only cutting the drying out branches again will make the space available for use.

The branches are contained by a L-shaped wall installed in the space in order to make it more available for art shows. A wall hiding the reality of the space. A wall behind which a path leads to the source of the sound one hears when entering the space. Back there, three blind vitrines made out of cardboard and covered with translucent architect's paper will glow from fluorescent light. There is nothing to look at – no artefacts displayed, no projects presented. Still they work, somehow: two of them seem to talk together, and through their endless discussion, the listener gets an image of a place, its past and plans. The third one hosts noises, fragmented field recordings of the Aspanggründe, looped past present.

The uncanny appears only once you return

I had to go back. Not some spiritual imperative, just that I had to go back with my plan: to get the branches, to get material to replant them in the space. I had a plan now to apply on the area. We got there and got the branches.

Later, enthusiast I went in. I knew now the trails, I felt like home. I guided my co-workers through the place. I was fast and empty-handed to be able to collect the expected material, plastic bottles. I was very fast. I felt super excited again – they were astonished, could hardly follow, had to believe me. Those who followed me found bottles, we found a lot. It was so easy – Was I recycling trash, robbing material, transforming the space? Was this an interaction?

We were only two left. And then we came across it! Life had spread. In the middle of a dense undergrowth, a bit away from the path, there was an artificial clearing. It was delimited with ripped branches being woven between the trees around the clearing, building a one-meter high barrier. The ground in the clearing was cleared of any trash or organic material. A circle of nearly 4 meters diameter with a single pole in the middle planted in the ground. On the top of the pole was an empty alcohol bottle and a pink plastic microscope was screwed on eye level. The barrier had one open access, but it was not towards the path. We had a hard time getting to it. The access oriented deeper in the underwood, where no path or place was recognizable yet. We tried and gave up, the arms full of bottles to take away. We left. This was the end. This is the beginning.