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Whose Participation? Spaces of Interaction in Contemporary Art and Architecture

ETH Zurich / Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, Switzerland, Dec 16–17, 2011
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Stierli, Martino

CfP: Whose Participation? Spaces of Interaction in Contemporary Art and Architecture
December 16/17, 2011
Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, Switzerland
Organized by the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta), ETH Zurich

Call for Papers

In the wake of the revolutionary unrest of the late 1960s, the idea of participatory art and architecture has lost its utopian connotations to become a complex debate about the active role of the spectator—and dweller—in space. Models critical of technocratic social planning have seen in interactive art and architecture the latest mode of authoritarian control (Foucault, Bourdieu); others, taking their cue from reuse and reorientation of spaces and artifacts, have seen in cooperative or 'relational' aesthetics the only viable politics in an era of global capitalism (de Certeau, Bourriaud). The nerve of the debate lies in the equation of sociality and space. The first camp sees social life as strongly determined or produced by space, while the second sees spaces as malleable, adaptable, fundamentally produced by social actors. It is this causal nexus between space and social life that, above all, we wish to draw attention to and put into question.

Concretely, the question might be addressed by reconsidering the traditional relations posited between producer, object, and addressee. Is power exerted in only one direction or could we describe these relationships as complex networks of interaction? Is space formed once and for all, or is it the changeable product of changeable patterns of use? Is the aesthetic always equivalent to the political, or might an aesthetically authoritarian space be conducive to social emancipation? How does the mediatization of urban space challenge concepts of participation and audience? We seek to question one-sided models, which presume perfectly passive or perfectly autonomous participants. This should, in turn, lead to more plausible accounts of the relationship between space, object and democracy.

We welcome contributions that address the following concerns:
Can participatory models create a stage for "social interaction", in which behavior and reactions are carefully anticipated rather than performed freely?
Can theatre or a scenographic model of space explain sociality as the interaction of actors?
Does the artistic object or architectural space prescribe deictic procedures of its reception?
How is agency performed in the relationship between producer, object, and recipient/participant?

Does the rhetoric of participation serve to disguise the artist or architect as authority?
Do participatory models in art, architecture and urbanism exclude certain groups or individuals?

We seek 30-minute presentations from art and architectural history, urban planning, scenography, sociology, and related disciplines. Possible contributions should deal with case studies from art or architecture that address the relationship between object and viewer/user. Our conference will focus on the period since the 1960s; however, theoretical and historical contributions are welcome if they add critically to contemporary debate.

Please send a 250-word abstract and short cv to Martino Stierli and Mechtild Widrich (martino.stierli@gta.arch.ethz.ch and mechtild.widrich@gta.arch.ethz.ch) by August 1, 2011. Confirmations will be sent out by August 15, 2011. The conference takes place on December 16 and 17, 2011, at the Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich. The conference is organized by the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta), ETH Zurich. Depending on funding, grants for travel and accommodation will be made available. A selection of the contributions will be published.