ARCHITECTURE AS POLITICAL PRACTICE
Roemer van Toorn in conversation with Markus Miessen

RvT The good news is that politics is on everybody lips, the bad news is that politics is about everything and nothing nowadays. Ten years ago a New York fashion line was born named Theory. Buzzwords of the cultural elite – like the return to the sixties – become the next luxurious Theory Icon project. Facing the crisis of neoliberalism, Politics has become the next project of intellectual entertainment. Many contemporary artist, curators, philosophers, sociologist, journalists, critics and architects do tap into politics, knowing that they can no longer celebrate their work on its own autistic terms. How do you read this current trend of politics as fashion in architecture?

MM Suddenly, architects tend to think that they are facing the urgencies of the world. What scares me a bit is when these proclamations are based on the realisation that, without stating them, their faces might no longer furnish the cover of magazines and journals. Recently, even the most formally driven protagonists have declared an interest in politics. Most architects who build are complete nerds in the most positive sense of the word. They know very well how to do certain things but are very bad at doing others. The Renaissance idea of the polymath is long gone and, unfortunately, is no longer on the agenda of most educational institutions, which has resulted in a situation where there are some amazing people who can do perfect drawings and wire-frame models, but when they begin to talk about politics, social frameworks or policy proposal, reminds me of sitting in a pub with your best mate listening to a 70-year old at the bar, debating foreign politics.

RvT Do you mean that with the disappearance of the *homo-universalis* out of the equation of the role of architecture – in fact all theories of critical architecture as defined by Michael Hays and Peter Eisenman for instance – with their preoccupation for architecture itself, as act of cultural resistance, is futile?

MM Cultural resistance – hmm. If you resist, the most important thing is that you know what you are resisting against. There are not many seriously political architecture projects that I can think of. Some of Team 10's projects are amazing in this regard, also the underlying notion of Buckminster Fuller, or, more recently Tomas Saraceno. If you think of Louis Kahn's National Assembly Building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, it has a vision that goes beyond the, mostly central European, idea of 'this architecture project is to build a parliament'. Rather, it builds on the vision of community and forum without being colonial, patronizing or romantic about notions of inclusion/exclusion. What I am slightly scared about is that most practitioners within the field today somehow tend to fall into the default romantic, leftist mode of politics as soon as they consider 'the political'. This is not to say that I would rather not have them base their political ideas left of centre, not at all, but rather that project-making of an 'alternative spatial practice' kind should aim to go beyond small, well-informed audiences from the same cultural milieu, but try to address larger publics without becoming populist. This sounds great, or not so great, but of course, I also haven't come up with the project that can prove this yet.

RvT Do you agree with Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting[1] that instead of fighting reification with the indexical, the dialectic and hot representation, an alternative genealogy of what they call the Projective – linked to the diagrammatic, the atmospheric and cool performance should be developed? This assertion is more concerned with the visionary as opposed to the commentary, the innovative to the reactionary, addressing emerging issues such as contemporary mass culture instead of the classical language of architecture such as the one of Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier.

MM I would like to try to make a really terrible generalization here: I would argue that, roughly speaking, one can divide the entire field of architecture and urbanism into two kinds of practitioners. Those, who I would call the 'peer architect', the individual or collective practice whose main concern is to produce work that will challenge the field of architecture and produce discourse within this field. And secondly those, who I would call the 'external architect', those, who are interested of course in architecture and its physical becoming, but are more interested in the effect that these interventions have vis-à-vis other fields of knowledge, and in particular, what kind of space/time relationships their work generates in terms of users. I have to admit I am much more interested in the latter. Moreover, I would argue that critical attitude always has to be projective, i.e. has to have a constructive attitude with optimism at its core. Without optimism, we can give up straight away. This is something that I tremendously admire about my great colleague and friend Hans Ulrich Obrist. He always attempts to turn any situation into something that is essentially based on optimism at its core. Consequently, any decision-making becomes projective and productive in an energetic way, rather than bitter and simply critical. Critique is not enough. Also, I am not even sure if I would call it critique per se. We are in a way talking about different ways of doing things. That is also why I talked about the idea of the nerd as opposed to the idea of the polymath before. In order to take this conversation forward, we need to be pro-active, we need to put our views, ideas and actual proposals forward, and – most importantly – put our balls on the table. This sounds really testosterone driven, but what I am trying to say is that if things are only ever discussed in terms of discourse or theoretical frameworks, they are of course very difficult to test. The default defence-mode of an architect is therefore always: 'well, at least

[1] Robert Somol & Sarah Whiting. "Notes around the doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism", Perspecta 33, The Yale Architectural Journal, 2002.

I am DOING something' (i.e. I am not JUST thinking). I think the binary opposition doesn't help at all, what we need is a middle ground. This is what I am trying to explore through some of my projects.

RvT What we see – and the Projective is just one of the keywords trying to frame this new approach – is that a younger generation now coming into power – raised in welfare after the Sixties – no longer believes in any critique of ideology. In fact they want to move beyond the critique of ideology. Instead it is all about an approach that can effectively engage in the transformation of reality, that is – as Alejandro Zaero Polo says in this issue (page ..) "to work politically – and simultaneously update the core of the discipline." Alejandro's observation is that we have to open up the definition of architecture to the market forces, its technical advances and operate as a critical agent. Alejandro looks for a political discourse of architecture producing effects "…that may actually destabilize power regimes rather than functioning as mere representation of politics, be it of the status quo or its resisting parties". How do you read this sudden interest in politics, a resistance practiced through the discipline (materiality) of architecture itself?

MM To comment on the issue of ideology, I find it difficult to think along the registers of ideology, because I am a very curious guy, who gets easily excited. This, by default, means that I can take a particular (learned) theory, practice or experienced phenomenon only serious up to the point that I encounter the next, more interesting, smarter or more surprising reality. And I tend to assume that there is something more interesting waiting behind the corner. This is not to say that I do not take my own work serious, but, on the contrary, to say that I take it so serious that I have to know that I should not tale myself too serious. This is, at least from my understanding, the exact opposite of ideology. As to your other question about a sudden interest in politics, most architects use very hermetic language, which makes it very difficult for me to figure out whether they are really onto something or not. Of course it sounds interesting to "destabilise power regimes", but at the end of the day I doubt that this can be achieved with the help of an I-beam and a sheet of glass. What many architects forget is that space is a rather complex matter and that it rules are rarely governed by architecture itself. In case they are, physical barriers tend to be the most simple one to overcome. I would be interested in a constructive dialogue about political space, which in my point of view needs to allow for conflicts to be played out: spatially, socially, economically, and politically. This might sound terrible, but I do believe that the most interesting spatial interventions, constructed by the public rather than architects, occur, where polar opposites clash in a conflictual way. If you look at gated communities, or other extreme forms of space, they are – on the one hand – terrible because they spatialize what our economy and welfare state has for a long time now been like, but at the same time, the urban conflict it generates usually leads to surprising spatial and social results. It creates a momentum. Now, if one would be able to establish a spatial regime, which was as polarised without being harsh in terms of social realities, I think we would be witnessing an amazing project. Teddy Cruz' work in many ways can be read along those lines, as he is one of the few people I know today, who manage to bridge the gap between an interesting constructive discourse on the one hand and building and constructing reality on the other. To answer your question about resistance practice through architecture itself, I still believe that in order to challenge existing frameworks, the application needs to be more complex and go beyond the physicality and scale of architecture.

RvT According to me the problem is not to make political architecture, but to make architecture politically. This notion – how to make architecture politically – is not at the heart of Alejandro concern. He never talked, or developed a theory how the architecture discipline effects people; on an imaginary/theatrical, psychological or in fact public manner. He stops short at the level of the (super)functional[2] description of the architecture object itself, simplifying and avoiding the complex, unsure and difficult issue how architecture as disciplinary knowledge in fact produces specific sensations, narratives and new notions of the collective and of the private. You have had an ongoing conversation with Chantal Mouffe over the last year, investigating the potential of a move into a definition of architecture practice as a form of radical democracy, and how dissensus works in operation on the level of architecture (city and building)[3]. What is her definition of the political and how do you *translate* that into your practice?

MM Chantal has written extensively on the struggle of politics and the radical heart of democratic life, trying to understand why in the kind of society we are living today, which she calls a post-political society, there is an increasing disaffection with democratic institutions. Her main thesis, if I may say so, is that the dimension of the political is something that is linked to the dimension of conflict that exists in human societies: an ever-present possibility of antagonism. The reason why I have been very interested in this exchange was to understand how this agonistic struggle could be imagined and tested in spatial settings, frameworks, which would allow to envisage a struggle between different interpretations of shared principles, a conflictual consensus, as Chantal says, a "consensus on the principles, disagreement about their interpretation". Democratic processes should aim to supply an arena in which differences can be confronted. Agonism as a constructive form of political conflict might offer an opportunity for constructive expression of disagreements. From my point of view, this becomes most interesting on an institutional scale, a microcosm that essentially could reflect society at large. The post-political society that Chantal refers to is one, in which we are constantly being told that the partisan model of politics has been overcome, that there is no more Left and Right: there is this kind of consensus at the centre, in which there is really no possibility for an alternative. This is precisely why there is a serious need for the creation of agonistic

---

[2] In search of a new Neufert, this time based on dynamic and not static data.
[3] See interview Markus Miessen with Chantal Mouffe: 'Articulated Power Relations', in: Miessen, M. (ed), The Violence of Participation, Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press, 2007

publics and public spaces. When I say public space, I don't refer to landscape architecture, but to the 'becoming spatial' of political forms of exchange. One could argue that any form of participation is already a form of conflict. In order to participate in an environment or a given situation, one needs to understand the forces of conflict that act upon that environment. How can one move away from romanticised notions of participation into more pro-active, conflictual models of engagement? And architecture is always political, as it is the result of a complex structure of decision-making processes, both public and private in nature. Therefore, architecture is also always produces new social realities as space structures relationships between people, be it in a positive or negative way.

RvT Do you consider yourself still an architect? You edit books, design exhibitions, develop scenarios, you do research as educator, you organize events, where is architecture?

MM Weirdly, for the first time in years, architecture as in built space is coming back on my agenda. I had already thought it was gone somehow. The way in which we (my partners Ralf Pflugfelder and Magnus Nilsson) approach it though is in a very selected way. This is not supposed to sound arrogant in the sense that we don't need certain jobs, but rather that we do certain things that secure our survival and would rather choose the architectural scale projects carefully, in order to continue to work on what interests. This also means that – in the long run – we can develop a thesis spatially. We are three partners, and each of us has a particular expertise, a strength that, as a team, we can build on. It works remarkably well. At the same time I continue working individually, through research, writing, and commissions in the art world. My work as an editor has somehow driven me back into architecture, which I find very interesting. There is definitely a renewed interest in architecture as a discipline, but that doesn't necessarily have to mean in the act of building per se. I would argue that there is no singular, but rather a multitude of definitions, depending on what one is interested in. I find it quite difficult to define 'the architect', but I can try to define what I understand as something that one might call 'modes of contemporary practice'. A friend and colleague of mine, who is an architect in Austria, now runs workshops for McKinsey Germany, to teach them how to think 'outside the box': how can economists and politicians learn from architects. I am most interested in the political work of spatial practitioners. Projects, where authorships start to blur. We are now working on a project with the Slovenian Government, a cultural project that runs in parallel with Slovenia's presidency of the EU council. In many ways, it presents a sequel to the Lyon Biennial project (The Violence of Participation). It wouldn't have happened without it. The Consul General of Slovenia in New York realized that this outsider's perspective is somewhat interesting. I am working on this project in collaboration with School of Missing Studies (architect Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss and curator Katherine Carl). What we are bringing to the Slovenian government here is essentially curatorial knowledge; what we are doing at the events, and finally in the book, is to question and further the notion of Eastern Europe by starting to overlap voices from an imagined East Coast Europe and the East Coast of the United States. It seems that especially in the US, there is still a very cliché perception of Eastern Europe. We want to start a conversation about cultural and spatial perception of this, to my mind, currently most important part of the Union and how to deal with its ongoing expansion. One of the hypotheses that the project is based on is the one that I was working with for The Violence of Participation project, namely that Europe for many Europeans seems to be very difficult to grasp, because they do not perceive it, or cannot visualize it, as a space.

RvT Is the old definition of the discipline outdated, and the classical object outdated?

MM I don't think it has to do with whether something is outdated or not, because this would assume that we are talking about trends or particular issues that are either en vogue or not. Of course there is this recent phenomenon of 'the political' – everyone should be allowed to make up their mind about it. What is slightly irritating is if people claim it simply because it seems to be an "of the moment' thing. I would suggest that we don't think about issues or ways of practicing as outdated or en vogue, but rather, and this might sound almost hippyesque, that everyone should just be doing what they are most happy doing, what they are interested in and what they think they are best at. In regards to building, I am interested in designing spaces for social, educational and critical exchange of knowledge. In order to facilitate these spatial concerns, involvement in content is crucial. I don't think that designing containers without considering what it holds will enable us to question, challenge or develop any existing modes of operation.

RvT In the context of projects such as the European Kunsthalle, how did this inform your work? How did it challenge existing modes of operation of musealization; the one of the museum and of art in the public sphere?

MM From 2005 to 2007, Nikolaus Hirsch, Philipp Misselwitz, Matthias Görlich and I worked on a project titled Spaces of Production for the European Kunsthalle Cologne. The study conceptualized, tested and practically applied a spatial strategy for the European Kunsthalle, an institution in the making. It did not result from purely theoretical considerations but was the result of the activities incorporated into the European Kunsthalle founding phase. The spatial strategy for the European Kunsthalle was the direct result of applied research – an iterative investigation informed by resonances between theory and practice. What the group tried to develop was an alternative take on how cultural institutions might spatialize in contemporary Europe. There were two major components within this two-year phase: a 30-day symposium, scattered over Cologne's city centre, with ongoing roundtable discussions that investigated the most pressing questions of artistic and cultural discourse in Europe today; the second large-scale project of the European Kunsthalle was the exhibition Models for Tomorrow, which tested some of the investigative research about the potential of post-public spaces in cities. Our work culminated in

a concentric ring layout in the city centre of Cologne, which allowed for a 2,5 hour walk along a newly designed urban route, which would take you through 22 exhibition spaces with site specific installations. The point of this exercise was to illustrate that there is a plethora of possibilities for an institution to 'become', other than the default mode of constructing a physical building, which eats up the operative capital of the institution and leaves no resources left for challenging and complex programming of those spaces.

RvT Capitalism like no other model in history is able to reinvent itself on the basis of crisis. Once it is confronted with its negative outcome[4] it is able to revolutionize its own logic. This creative destruction stands at the heart of an approach that – after severe critique and analysis– believes that you can build counter-worlds from within. According to Mike Davis[5] you can only be against Dubai, there is nothing social to be able to renew from within, the market takes it all, but you see opportunities…

MM This is an interesting point; especially in terms of the celebration of the market. Dubai can, most certainly, be understood or read as a place that is scary. At the same time, it performs a double-function: it acts as a mirror facing the 'West' with its own, accelerated image. Simultaneously, it is, by many, understood as a test-ground with massive potential. Unfortunately most observers in the West tend to think that this idea of the test-ground refers to reputable architects, most of them from a different generation, living out their formal dreams. But this only holds true for a particular segment of the phenomenon. What is much more interesting right now is the micro-scale: for the first time, things are happening on a smaller, even institutional level. Galleries and other types of public platforms have been popping up over the last three years. Of course there is also the megalomaniac scale, and I think it is here that the celebration of the market that you are referring to becomes most easily detectable: everything sells. Without trying to generalize, I think one can say that the Middle East, and the Gulf region in particular, are currently going through an incredible phase. Not in terms of their construction boom, as any intelligent or not-so-intelligent daily newspaper around the globe has reported on, but because of the societal changes that these regions have been pushed through in the last two decades. Dubai is probably the epitome of those changes, where an entire society has been peacefully forced through modernity in a decade. When European newspapers today report about the shocking realities of Dubai's labour camps, they often forget to talk about another reality alongside it: that within two years the first labour unions were established and that the government has put in place a set of laws that start to hand over rights from the construction companies to the labourers. This is only one of many examples. If a benevolent dictatorship, which Dubai is, can go through such dramatic changes within two years, and essentially emancipate an entire society within a decade, I – as European – am getting slightly worried about the pessimistic debate we are leading in regards to whether or not Turkey should be allowed to join the Union. What architects should be working on are spatial responses to some of those questions rather than remote, arrogant critique. And I would argue that it is mainly an issue of scale. If we look at the Gulf region right now, and in more detail its institutional landscape, and investigate it in relation to the institutional landscape in Europe, we will detect that there is a complete lack of small-scale, public institutions. If we pay attention to the current politics of major universities in the US, especially the Ivy League ones, there is a worrying development regarding the outsourcing of campuses towards the Middle East. What is worrying is not that they are getting involved there in general, but that the average institution that is setting up a new campus simply send a selection of their home-faculty to teach there; often with no local expertise and employed on rolling contracts, which means that after three to four years they return to their host campus. This entails that these institutions are not interested in building up local knowledge at all but simply in the export of a particular methodology of knowledge and teaching. What needs to happen instead is the slow but steady development and building up of small-scale institutions that create a platform for local exchange and allow for the building up, fostering, and growth of local knowledge. Without trading entire histories for those imported from Europe or the US. I am currently working on two projects in Dubai and Abu Dhabi: one with my office which will develop a spatial model for a small-scale platform, which will present what one might call an anti-thesis to Dubai as we know it, and the other one with the cultural district in Abu Dhabi, where we are attempting to set up a new small-scale school, which is based on some of the premises that I introduced when setting up the Winter School for the Architectural Association in Fall 2007; but no longer through the lens of an institution from Western Europe, but one that is growing locally.

RvT Do I understand you correct that instead of what Keller Easterling recently called in a lecture during a Masterclass at the Berlage Institute[6] about The Right Story, we have to work with The Wrong Story? Afterall Mike Davis and the Financial Times are right, but the critique by Davis and the celebration of bigness by the Financial Times, etc don't help us to see what is happening in the faults of the system, let alone allows us to cheat in the mix, surf the creative destruction of turbo-capitalism. In other words: do you act like a pirate? Infiltrate and even celebrate the system to arrive at the other end?

MM To return to your earlier point about ideology: Mike Davis, in my view, is someone with an ideology. Davis is a good example for ideology being a hindrance rather than something that is being used in a productive manner. I am sure you are familiar with his book Evil Paradises. He continues to talk about privileged forms of human lifes versus the 'underclass'. Of course I can understand where this is coming from, but I am not sure whether the black and white rendering of the world is so helpful in terms of moving things forward. Also, I am not sure whether he

---

[4] See also Shock Doctrine, Naomi Klein

[5] See Evil Paradises, Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism, edited by Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk.

[6]

has ever been to Dubai. Obviously it's true that what most so-called 'starchitects' are building there does not really contribute to the 'greater good', but at the same time it accelerates a liberalisation of more general practices within a society such as Dubai. The first time I went to Dubai was in early 2007, and I have been eight times since. It is just simply amazing what has happened there in this period, let alone the last decade. I am not talking about the frantic growth of the city, but the way in which things changed in a societal way, in terms of how institutions are coming alive, in the way that things are opening up. This is something that Davis does not talk about at all. Imagine a country like the US, the UK or any other central European country going through changes that, here, took place over a century, in a decade. It is too easy to just slag it off in terms of capitalism versus the worker without rights. Also, the situation of most construction workers has changed tremendously. There are now unions, which, even a couple of years ago, was unimaginable. What Davis criticises about other practitioners such as Koolhaas is the typical spiel that one knows from China, where both Koolhaas and Herzog&DeMeuron are being accused off catering for a totalitarian regime. Where I agree in terms of the critique is that it could be more useful to consider smaller scale interventions in which the public can actually engage in, a sort of built manifesto for public congregation or a forum of sorts. This is what we are trying to establish with the AA Winter School Middle East, which I direct in Dubai. Although it is only a short 2-week annual workshop, minute in size, it manages to put into place a platform for critical exchange, which – through its rather hermetic nature – enables locals from the wider region to speak and develop ideas freely. These kinds of efforts are not singular efforts. They tend to happen more and more often, either through galleries or other small public or private institutions. I am a very strong believer in both the necessity and long-term success of such platforms.

RvT In an earlier conversation, you also talked about alternative forms of entry. Can you please elaborate on this?

MM What I refer to does not necessarily relate to forms of opposition but alternative regimes of entry. How does one manage to gain access into fields of knowledge and practices that one is usually not invited to take part in; I don't think that negating will get you anywhere. It's like opposition: very often it is a way for cynics illustrating their impotence. Maybe I am a romantic driven by relentless optimism, but I genuinely believe that change is possible. And in case this does not happen through a client, the client needs to be invented or self-generated. Constructive criticism through offering alternatives is always more fruitful than simply being reactive. There are think tanks and other collectives and groups that have of course been working on outsiders' expertise for a long time – strategic consulting and so forth. One thing that I find quite problematic about conventional consulting though is that it takes almost for granted that things HAVE to change, i.e. if you look at McKinsey, Deloitte, Accenture or PricewaterhouseCoopers, these guys come into a company, city, or even country (like in the case of Bahrain) and tell them how to change things. There is this unspoken rule that if they do not alter existing realities, frameworks and customs, they are not worth the money. I like to think of it more as someone, who in the British parliamentary system would be called a cross-bench politician, someone with no ties to the political parties at play. AMO of course have tried that for a while now, sometimes with remarkable success, like in the Europe project, sometimes with less success, not because they haven't done good work, but because it still takes sometime for others to understand the value of the architect's strategic expertise as an outsider that can challenge and critically add to existing institutional, economic, social or governmental frameworks. I am currently working on a book, my PhD, which is titled 'The Uninvited Outsider'. In it, I am trying to deal with some of those questions. How can one propose an alternative practice engaging in spatial projects dealing with social and political realities? What could a polyphonic spatial practice potentially be? Spatial planning is often considered as the management of spatial conflicts. The progressive institution exists as a social and spatial conflict zone, re-negotiating its limits through constant transformation. To deal with conflicts, critical decision-making must evolve. Such decision-making is often pre-supposed as a process whose ultimate goal is that of consensus. My thesis proposes to foster micro-political participation in the production of space and ask the question of how one can contribute to alien fields of knowledge, professions or discourses from the point of view of "space". It is my believe that through cyclical specialisation, the future spatial practitioner could arguably be understood as an outsider who – instead of trying to set up or sustain common denominators of consensus – enters existing situations or projects by deliberately instigating conflictual realities between often-delineated fields of knowledge.

RvT You are also working on a proposal for a fellowship at Harvard.

MM Yes, Joseph Grima, Director of Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York, and I are currently working on a project and proposal that sets out to investigate to 'learn from' rather than purely 'acting against'. Energy shortages and climate change are bringing vast infrastructural projects of an unprecedented scale into reality. At the same time, private armies such as Blackwater have become increasingly influential actors on the international stage, with quasi-permanent outposts in almost every continent: fortified enclaves and de facto 'geopolitical islands' are proliferating on every scale from entire regions, such as the West Bank and Gaza, to single buildings, such as the new American Embassy in Baghdad. The project will start by developing an index of contemporary spatial strategies collected not only from contemporary architectural practice and theory, but also from military science, corporate policy, logistical infrastructure, the tourism industry and communications networks. Strategies resulting from the indexing of a substantial number of case studies will be distilled into a diagrammatic list of 'spatial formulae', the equivalent of the genetic segments of contemporary geopolitics. The objective of this index is twofold: first, it is intended to allow for objective analysis of individual strategies, disconnected from their origins, without the risk of moral prejudice induced by their current applications. Secondly, it will constitute a kit of parts that can potentially be recombined to create previously unexplored 'spatial devices', which would ideally

manifest in a table of elements of sorts, through which new alloys can be formed. The ultimate objective of this list is to test possible applications and recombinations of these strategies in real-world scenarios. A checklist of 'test situations' will be created to learn from existing conditions and operations through critical reflection, analysis and the development of a set of projective tools. By testing the index of strategies against a list of contemporary geopolitical flashpoints, a series of hypothetical – and potentially fertile – design strategies will be developed.

RvT What becomes clearer than ever to me is that reality demands a theory; a new vision beyond the one of neo-liberalism. The excellent news is that the United States is increasingly exposed and weakened on the financial markets. The current economic crisis acts as capitalism's moment of truth: it suddenly unveils the ordinary fetishezed real structure of society. The bad news is that both the Left and the Right in our 21st century have no theory left. Reality as found is now all that counts, and functions as the perfect alibi to get away with murder. This addiction to extreme realism, both on the Left (disenchanted) and Right (acting big), demands a new theory according to me. Excavating and curating the real, while advocating relational aesthetics and antagonistic platforms is essential – as you have shown in your work, but is that enough? Shouldn't you also make your "hidden" ideology – why you choose certain topics and for whom you fight, create certain and not other freedoms – more explicit? Antagonism is essential, but don't you think that your principles of consensus should be clearly stated too?

MM Speculative theories are the basis to develop projective matter. Most interesting projects start with a hypothesis that needs or wants to be tested. Sometime this can be achieved in a spatial or physical way, other times this can be developed through a series of curatorial test-beds first. What we attempt to do with the Dubai Winter School is to inquire how certain local frameworks and structures work. The last Winter School problematized the issue of the labour camps. But rather than simply blacklisting the practices that are at play, we tried to understand how some of the mechanisms function, how decisions are being made and how those realities can be altered in the future. My office also started talking to local developers and architects that are involved in the construction of the camps. We are now at a point where we might be able to intervene by proposing spatial alternatives, but things simply take time and lots of effort. At a similar scale, we are investigating the potentials through a Vietnamese NGO to get involved in a large-scale social housing scheme in Hanoi. At this moment in time, we are doing consulting on the project, but there is now a possibility to take this to the next level. These projects, at their core, are also educational projects in many ways. You are coming into the project from the outside and first of all have to unlearn your collaborators certain status quo practices, which they take for granted.

RvT Nowadays more and more designers are fearful of placing a particular antagonism or alternative above another for fear of choosing a faulty cause as already happened with Modernism, Communism and Maoism. They embrace pluralism and the endless relations that an intelligent system can generate. The danger is that their search for difference or the stimulation of the unpredictable is elevated to an absolute law, and the possibility of difference is fetishised. Many children of the Hippies generation produce nothing but an advanced form of entertainment, precisely because they in no way express their support for or opposition to anything, except a desire to be self-organizing and interactive. As we both know the feast of endless differences no longer guarantees liberation. Present-day capitalism has bid farewell to totalizing regulation. Digital capitalism has even turned Deleuzian. The carnivalesque character of everyday life now even guarantees high profits through the permanent revolution of its own order. In what sense could a political practice in architecture be different from the current condition I just described?

MM I am very fond of Chantal's proposal to think both 'with and against Schmitt', referring to the political theorist and German jurist Carl Schmitt. This is a good example for how to operate: to no longer discuss and foster endless differences but to also move forward in a constructive manner. I think optimism and a constructive ambition is generally the way to go. You are totally right, to simply fetishize the possibility of difference, to crave for conflict and antagonism for the sake of it, does neither produce meaningful debate nor praxis. I really believe that architecture, as outlines by Volume a while ago, needs to go beyond itself. To be more precise, this could entail that instead of just trying to react against, we actually try to find the weak point of the system under debate, and try to work on them, not in the sense of a Modernist problem solving or social engineering exercise, but by altering and tweaking some of the variables at play. Further, I think there is a kind of naivety at play when some people talk about opposing capitalism. This also holds true for capitalism within architecture. To just say developers are the bad guys, is not only defensive but also doesn't propel neither discourse nor practice. I would be interested, for example, on working with a large-scale developer in order to rethink housing for the elderly, a project that we have been working on for a while now through a think tank at the Serpentine Gallery. One of the more general problems we are facing today is that most practitioners are no longer willing to take risks. This comes a long with a fear of making decisions, which – together – is a lethal cocktail. Capitalism of course is the one system that manages to identify, embrace and embody – vis-à-vis its own tactics – any other system and/or opposing force and critique rapidly. This is one of the reasons, I believe, why our own positions, i.e. yours and mine, are very endangered. We could probably quite easily come up with more or less smart frameworks for alternative programmes, but one must be aware that they get eaten up very quickly by someone else, and I would strongly recommend to make sure that one is in touch with that 'someone else' rather than letting those forces hijack ones idea and misinterpret, develop and sell them themselves.

RvT What Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Ranciere and we both agree about is that the political only emerges when disagreement (conflict) is part of the system you built. A certain foreignness or even violence is enacted to invite the user/viewer to take part. Through disagreement within a system – not opposition or critique – a final answer is avoided and agonism realised. What are the advantages of such an open system? And what are the different (aesthetic and spatial) techniques you have used in publications, exhibitions, buildings and alike?

MM We are currently working on a project with Hans Ulrich Obrist in the Swiss Alps. The aim is to generate a cultural centre, which is modelled around his own private archive [as featured in the last issue of VOLUME: a high-alpine cultural centre that consists of a library archive of 20,000 books, video recordings, and other media, as well as a residency programme for artists, a small exhibition space, a number of overnight facilities as well as a small Summer Academy] as a central resource for conversation and exchange. For us, the social implications of this 'architecture' are most evident in two questions: first, how one can question the organizational structure of libraries in the sense that it produces surprising results and relationships between content, and secondly, how the spatial structure of the centre can produce a blueprint for social interaction, an environment for people to meet, to seclude themselves while still being part of a larger community, how conflicts can be played out. For us, this is where architecture can have an impact on small-scale societal structures.

RvT In your works – books, diagrams and projects – I sense certain calmness, in other words a certain distance from the material (content) you mediate. You could call this the relative autonomy of your aesthetics. On the one hand this has to do with the pragmatics of reading; the accessibility of information. But that is not what I like to talk about now. There is certain calmness, silence, even emptiness present in your work. No MTV wildness, or porno populism we know from AMO's publication Content, but a downplayed roughness of simplicity and informality. Could you explain why you use these aesthetic regimes, or why this relative autonomy needs to be there? Or in other words what kind of antagonistic space is being created through this relative autonomy of silence and poetic emptiness in your work?

MM There is something about involvement; if you get too close, you cannot stay objective I think. Many leftist projects face this problem: they interpret participation as a means of becoming a service provider for a democratic community. I have recently been thinking about this a lot. It is strange to me that a particular politics seems to be understood always in tandem with a particular style. It's almost as if, in order to come across as serious, you also need to follow a certain protocol in terms of how to do things, even to the extend of how you look. It's like choosing between Carhartt and Martin Margiela. There seems to be a consensus within the critical left in architecture and urbanism that dislikes the idea of doing serious work and still having fun, or, indeed, trying to look like you care. To give some examples in terms of the book I have worked on collaboratively in the recent past, we have always tried to combine the superserious with the slightly mirthful and geeky. My ultimate nightmare would be an academic book, which also has a certain claim that comes with it. I think it always helps to loose control of ones primary expertise at some point. One has to be able to let go, otherwise the nerdy turns against you. With 'Did Someone Say Participate – An Atlas of Spatial Practice', Shumon Basar and I, together with graphic designers Åbäke conceived a book, which deliberately looks like a children's schoolbook. We were very fond of the kind of visual naivety that an object like this suggests – at the same time, the content is very serious of course. I am not sure how many readers actually got the joke on the cover, where the rearranged global map spells out 'the future is inside' through the placement of islands, states, and resized continents. For the book on the Middle East that Shumon and I, together with Bidoun's Antonia Carver, edited for the Dubai-based think tank Moutamarat, we deliberately chose a kind of 'dirty paper'. Where we come from this is obviously nothing special and amongst the slightly more chique of us almost passé; however, in the Emirates, where everything that seemingly carries content has to be superglossy in order to withstand the crowds, the book managed to create a different kind of awareness, especially in terms auf audiences and the shifting of a more conservative target group. It is neither punk nor MTV and still manages to tap, generates and plays with fashion, like Purple magazine, for example. The language is sometimes essayistic, sometimes journalistic, sometimes conversation-like and sometimes visual only. In 'The Violence of Participation', Zak Kyes and I scattered sketches of the Lyon Biennial audience throughout the book, on the one hand to give it a rhythm, on the other to intersperse the seriousness of the conversations with the liberating straightforwardness of the drawings. I believe that these aesthetic techniques – the organization of form, fonts and paper – are essential go arrive at a radical democracy in the book. My latest book, East Coast Europe, which will be published in late October, will take this a step further and literally just be a textbook, but, even with a small budget, be mass produced by a small novel-type printer in Denmark. Through this, we will be able to achieve maximum distribution at minimal cost, plus cheap airport-like novel aesthetic, which means that readers will probably not treat it with too much respect, but rather as an everyday item that will be used, maybe used again, and then thrown away.

RvT For many the theory of Mouffe and Ranciere motivates an art and architecture of pure activism. According to me such an approach runs the risk celebrating activism only, without motivating or stating any alternative political direction. Disagreement (conflict) is no longer a tool but becomes an end in itself, with the risk of becoming anecdotic and sentimental. Questioning positions is not enough according to me. How do you see this? Shouldn't we also address certain urgencies, come up with alternative solutions? Break the museum as temple, destroy the

gated community, and reinvent the public sphere, work on new forms of welfare, as we will research at the Berlage Institute[7] after neoliberals' bankruptcy.

MM I think the question of urgency is always a misleading one, because it assumes that certain things have value and others do not. I find it quite difficult to draw the line here. I guess the only hopefully meaningful thing that I can say about this is that, personally, I am very interested in a particular discussion about urban and social frameworks in relation to architectural scale space, how that can affect the design process and the way in which institutions might function. One of the reasons why many things in this world exist as they are is because of its spatial context. This holds true even for institutional procedures, habits and practices. From my point of view, a smart architecture does not deliver a sexy rendering, but a complex operational and curatorial procedure. I totally agree with you that questioning positions is not enough. One of the major problems of built architecture is that it is always delayed. The timeframe between initial becoming and realisation of a project is so immense that many changes can and will happen in the meantime. Going back to the example of Dubai, proposing something now, might mean that in two years from now the political framework has changed entirely. However, this shouldn't be a reason to give up, but rather to pursue ones objectives in the most productive and optimistic manner. We hope to be able to deliver something that can be interrogated and discussed as to its failure or success very soon.

Markus Miessen is an architect, researcher and writer migrating between London, Berlin and Zurich. In 2002, he set up 'Studio Miessen', a platform for spatial strategy and critical cultural analysis. As an architect, Miessen is partner of the Berlin-based architectural firm 'noffice'. He is the author and editor of several books including Spaces of Uncertainty (Müller + Busmann, 2002), Did Someone Say Participate (MIT Press, 2006), With Without (Bidoun, 2007), The Violence of Participation (Sternberg Press, 2007), and East Coast Europe (Sternberg Press, 2008). He has been teaching at the Architectural Association since 2004 and is the Director of its Winter School Middle East, which he initiated. He has lectured widely, including at Columbia, MIT and the Berlage, and is currently a PhD candidate at Goldsmiths, elaborating on his thesis of the Uninvited Outsider. www.studiomiessen.com www.noffice.eu

Roemer van Toorn
Roemer van Toorn is an architect, writer, photographer and curator based in Amsterdam. After graduating from the University of Technology Delft, he published *The Invisible in Architecture* (1994), in collaboration with Ole Bouman. As professor, he runs and coordinates the *Projective Theory* program at the Berlage Institute and is staff member at Delft School of Design (DSD) at University of Technology Delft. He has been the editor of the annual publication *Architecture in the Netherlands*, as well as an advisor of the magazine *Archis(Volume)* and *Domus*. As author and photographer he contributes to many publications. His photography work has been exhibited in Winnipeg, Los Angeles, Humlebaek, London, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Orleans. He is working on a publication as part of his PhD research *Fresh Conservatism or Radical Democracy*? *Aesthetics as a Form of Politics*. Forthcoming in 2009 is his photobook the *Society of The And*.

---

[7] See also www.berlage-institute.nl