

## **CONTINGENCIES: REALITY IN FLUX**

Proposal for the 5<sup>th</sup> Scape Biennial of Art in Public Space, 2008

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Urban context and city life has always been a particular interest for artists. However, together with the phenomenon of Globalization, the transformations in the urban structures and processes, and the attempts to redefine the functions of the cities as the complex habitations for political representation, cultural consumption, tourism, education and leisure have opened up new possibilities for artistic interventions even more than before and the 90's marked a major twist in the artistic research and production towards this direction. The conception of public space as well has been changed with the cities themselves. The public space, which was considered as a social and cultural construct, has been defined as the constituting space housing and shaping the possible transformations in the social and cultural spheres. It is conceived not only as the physical urban space but also an abstract concept related to reinvention of democracy, equality and "publicness" through space.

60's and 70's witnessed the radical transformation of art in terms of its discourse, media and methods. As a reaction to the commodification and institutionalisation of art, the artists reinterpreted the "idea of art" and got out of the museums and galleries to the streets to create critical and provocative, temporal, site-specific, interactive works, performances and interventions instead of permanent autonomous aesthetic objects detached from their environments. Another shift occurred in the 90's closely allied to the question of "art in public space" and daily life politics. After the break down of the Berlin Wall and the fall of Soviet Empire, though the 90's artists followed the radical experimentalism of the 60's- 70's, the 90's was marked mainly by the loss of the idea of a "humanity project" and the "grand narratives" as such have been substituted by micro social gestures towards the improvement of community or locality. Instead of Social Utopias and Revolutions for a better future for the humanity, artists engaged with the idea of micro utopias and personal revolutions. The "relationality"<sup>1</sup> of the artwork with its physical environment, urban, social, political, economic and historical contexts and its engagement with the public/audience became more important. Formally, this shift points out to temporary spatial site and event-specific organizations and interventions, collaborative, interactive and socially engaged processes and projects, political activism and performances, Internet and media-bound practices and the like.

After the 11th of September, new tendencies in art in public space in disparate directions ranging from Neo-Marxist and Anti-Globalist approaches to the attempts to relocate the spatial politics have been appearing in the horizon of the art world. The political and social issues related to space have begun to take the upmost critical position in the contemporary discourses. "Never before have protagonists of diverse spatial practices shown so much

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud's "Relational Aesthetics", 1998 /English translation 2002, Les press du reel

interest in social issues” states Markus Miessen in *Contemporary 21 Magazine*<sup>2</sup>. Recently, political gestures and concerns of the artists have been growing from micro to macro again, without claiming a better future for the humanity or aiming at another social utopia. More frequently, the topics related to multiculturalism and identity politics have been replaced by topics like super-power politics, Capitalism and economic globalization, US attacks to Iraq, the World Economic Forums and the like. The extreme end of which points to the Protest Art. In terms of urban transformation, the artists, architects, urban designers and other actors shaping the urban public space endeavour to show the “otherwise” of the desired future identity of the cities which are considered as the space of spectacle and entertainment in line with the eclectic kitsch culture of the “society of spectacle”.

Unlike the early representational or late abstract modernist “drop” sculptures in the public space, contemporary interventions function in life, the real space and time. Any art project in the public space is born out of its relationship to the infinite number of spatial, urban, social, psychological, individual or communal, political and historical contingencies, thus, mediates and intervenes the reality in flux. Architecture, space, place, locality, city, society, community, neighborhood, all would situate themselves differently in accordance with the diverse perspectival ortagonals that they were caught in. Contingent realities are born at the intersection where the artist’ intentionality meets the infinite number of contingencies related to a specific situation or place. Artistic interventions make these hitherto invisible contingencies visible or understandable and propose a different experience of the locality/situation for a limited time. In that sense, the work is so interwoven with the social and urban context that it functions in two ways; a familiar situation as a part of the fabric so it wouldn’t be excluded at the first sight, but at the same time, a different formation that is foreign to the place/situation, thus, has the power to deconstruct the situation and unfold the already existing conventions and point out the specific locality’s position in regards to the spatial politics. The work, in this way, can open up situational realities / realities in flux for the inhabitants.

“Contingencies: Reality in Flux” not only refers to the simultaneous birth of artwork and the contingent reality it points out in the public space, but also, to the different ways of emergence of the city of Christchurch beyond its physical and geographical position, in the global art map simultaneously with the 5th Scape Biennial.

#### CRITERIA AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

The artistic criteria in the selection of the artists and proposals and the conceptual framework as well for the 5th Scape Biennial of Art in Public Space will be mainly depended on this reflection on the contingencies; the simultaneous birth of artwork and the contingent reality it points out in the public space. Certainly, the new “culture of space”, which considers the public space as the house of social and cultural turn, will be the guiding line of the conceptual framework. It is aimed at the revision of the concepts of “site-specificity” and “interactivity” in today’s and in Christchurch’s contexts and emergence of neologisms like “locale-specificity” and reinterpretation of the term “participation” will be among discussion points of the theoretical structure.

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<sup>2</sup> Markus Miessen, “Wondering Through the Chasms of Opportunity” in *Contemporary 21*, Special Issue on Art and Architecture, no:87, 2006, pg.16

There may be varied applications and processes ranging from architectural spatial interventions, temporary ephemeral performances and actions, and flyers, posters and billboards to light and sound installations and community oriented social engagements. However, the underlying principle will be their “interwovenness” with the social and urban fabric. It can be a spatial intervention to an already existing structure or a totally new architectural addition, no matter what, should be powerfully present, but also have the ability to disappear in the texture of the locality. Another point of reference is the concept of de-design as Vito Acconci puts forward “The function of public art is to de-design.”<sup>3</sup> All the projects will be valued in accordance with their ability to de-design/deconstruct the existing conventions and to reinvent the democracy, equality and “publicness” through the space, place and locality, in other words, through the city of Christchurch.

In the decision and production processes of the projects for the 5th Scape Biennial, the relationship with the relevant industries will be taken special care also as a part of the conceptual framework.

#### SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT, INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE AND NETWORKING:

The ultimate aim of the contemporary art biennials is to create a platform for social engagement with and among the inhabitants of the city (Christchurch in this case) and international dialogue and networking, as well as, is to take its place in the global art map. For that reason, to communicate the event locally and internationally carries an utmost importance and the process of communication should be continuous and prevail all year long starting one year prior to the opening date of the biennial.

**Locally**, lectures, panel discussions, workshops, artist talks and other forms of social engagements with the participation of distinguished international curators, critics and artists can be held during the year long starting one year prior to the opening and can be concentrated around the opening events. Through these activities focusing on and researching the current positions of art in public space, emerging tendencies and creative strategies as well as its historical background, it is intended to create an awareness and a public platform on the politics of space and specifically the function and reason d’être of art in public space today. The prospective curators can give a series of lectures in the art institutions and universities elaborating their visions and accomplishments in the field of art in public space besides the informative lectures on the 5th Scape Biennial.

**Internationally**, dialogue and communication can also start one year prior to the opening (even earlier) through the other international biennials, triennials and art fairs in the form of informal cocktails and gatherings where the biennial can be promoted socially and publicity materials can be distributed, press conferences and panel discussions. The Venice Biennial, Documenta, Art Basel, Munster Sculpture Project, all, will be opening in June 2007. Considering the limited time to the month of June, publicity materials like postcards and handouts can be prepared and distributed at these events and if there is an opportunity, an informal cocktail party for promoting the 5th Scape Biennial, 2008 can be given to the press

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<sup>3</sup> Vito Acconci, “Leaving Home, Notes on Insertions into the Public” in Public Art ed.by Florian Matzner, 2004, p.30

and international art world in the pavilion of New Zealand in Venice. Likewise, the International Istanbul Biennial will be opened in September 2007. If we take the last biennial's statistics as reference, it can be expected to have around 4000 international visitors including renowned curators, museum directors, artists, critics and art professionals from the supporting institutions at the opening of the Istanbul Biennial. A press conference on the 5th Scape Biennial can be organized during the opening events of the Istanbul Biennial. In accordance with the biennial and triennial calendar of the 2008, different strategies for the specific events can be planned, but certainly, the Director, the international press officer and the curators of the Scape Biennial should visit these events to promote the Scape Biennial socially and to make networking, and the publicity materials of the 5th Scape Biennial should be present in all these events to be distributed.

#### PUBLICATIONS:

Two books can be planned; the first one can be an informative guidebook ready for the opening and the second book can be a documentation of the exhibition and the social engagement and educational activities together with iconic texts and articles on the art in public space. It can be published after the exhibition ends and this can provide a second chance for the promotion of the biennial locally and internationally even after the completion of the whole event.