

19th February 2015

Dear Guests and Friends,

I am very happy to make this talk on behalf of Christoph, who is an excellent artist and a fascinating person, which is a very rare, indeed a difficult combination. I first get to know Christoph personally in 2011 when we invited him to give one of his “sparkling” lectures in “Social Housing – Housing the Social” the second edition of research, symposium and publication series initiated by the SKOR Foundation in Amsterdam. We knew him through the collective project “Park Fiction” and his “City is our Factory” publication, which was then recently published. In both projects, he facilitates his artistic practice for social cause in an enjoyable, humorous and non-conformist manner to create collective ways to co-produce the city through collective imagination.

Actually “Park Fiction” park is a couple of blocks from here and if there is anyone who still hasn’t seen it, I propose them to go after this gathering or anytime to visit the park and take a look at the archive which was invited by Documenta11 in 2002.

In this project, together with fellow artists, activists and residents of the neighborhood, they were able to convert the plans of the city and bite a piece of land on the banks of the Hamburg harbor to create a park. This resonated greatly and widespread in the art world as it symbolizes a victory of neighborhood people over the trans-national corporations through the aid of art.

I personally believe that art can be a medium for social change (through creating new subjectivities) but not necessarily a medium for immediate change or a tool for an instant result of a specific political situation. However, “Park Fiction” proved the reverse. Having employed methods and concepts such as a platform of exchange, production of desires, designing the planning process as a game, which generates (in his words) “a playful spirit and attitude that creates an inviting, yet defined, atmosphere”, Christoph contributed to the resistance of the neighborhood. In this

case, rather than an aesthetization of the political actions, art became a tool to dig out the hidden desires of the residents on the spaces/places that they live in.

In his series of drawings and publication “City is our Factory”, Christoph integrated his intense engagement with urbanism and people into critical theory and his very special personal rhetoric. We invited Christoph to show these drawings in the “Agoraphobia”, a prelude exhibition to the 13th Istanbul Biennial, at Tanas in Berlin in 2013.

Between a personal diary, a journalistic account and a logbook, he narrates visually the “rhizomatic” non-progressive history of urbanism that he calls the “condensation/accumulation of differences”. It covers a long period of time, starting from the 60.000 BC including one of the first Christian settlements in Cappadocia (Uchisar) or the civilization of Ur up to the present urban struggles that he himself was also involved in St. Pauli, Hamburg. Unfolding and actualizing Henri Lefebvre’s iconic book “Urban Revolution”, Christoph takes the “social questions as spatial questions” (pg.270) and reclaims the city as the self-organized production site, distinguishing it from the State. Rather than over-arching meta discourses and theories, he dives into the minute details of informality of everyday life that have a vast impact indeed on our lives or that signal what is to come like the cappuccino bars. He states: “As soon as there was an illegal club somewhere, a cappuccino bar would open next door, followed by a new media agency...” (pg.132)

Against the post-fordist working conditions and neo-liberal urban policies, together with his fellow artists, comrades and the neighborhood residents, they established an action network called “Es regnet Xavier” and developed unusual, extraordinary strategies like the “anti-gentrification kit” for the neighborhoods at risk (pg.182). He mentions that: “Looking back we had to admit that it was precisely the most deviant of our ideas that proved the most influential..” (pg.50)

One of the last chapters of “City is our Factory” is titled “A self-programmed factory of passions?” Christoph claims that: “under this banner, we might actually be able to

finally escape the narcissist trap of the Left, which brands itself or the subculture as the real motor of gentrification and consequently sinks into a protestant discourse of guilt-ethics and self-accusation.”

By replacing the guilt feelings with the principle of passion, rather than proposing equality in disparity, Christoph proposes a hedonistic platform that heightens up the libidinal energy, pleasures and desires. “Arm your desires!” or “Spatialize your desires” are the mottos that he articulates in his text for the “Salon Public Happiness” exhibition at Secessions Vienna last year (he was also the curator). However, the desires he mentions is not one of that produced by the capitalist consumerist machine, nor the neo-liberal boosting up of the ego, but, the ones that we enjoy being, acting and imagining collectively, together with others, even with the ones that we do not know before.

Christoph’s drawings are like intricate mental images of lived experiences, mostly resonating his unexpected encounters and stories in urban political contexts. Moreover, they embody his sharp reflections on the cities such as details of topography, geographical diversities like food or vegetation, city planning and architecture, demographic distribution and social segregation, or historical backdrops, etc. Hence, the rendering of his drawings also ranges variedly from immediate snapshot aesthetic to ancient travellers’ recordings, from abstract maps to cartography, from aerial to microscopic viewpoints, from humble doodling to elaborate mastery of line and composition. The humorous, yet, subtly complicated thoughts are articulated in an apparently intentional casualness, immediacy and simplicity, which in turn, creates an intimacy between the drawings and the onlooker. In combination with the lines and figures, often we come across letters, words and sentences that are depicted as 3 dimensional forms sometimes alluding to the buildings, creating streets and lining city contours, or connecting seemingly unrelated subjects, as if they are the embodiments of thoughts appearing from a chaotic flux into meaning.

Like “The City is our Factory”, the “Bostanorama” series were also created in an

urban struggle context; that means, before and during the Gezi resistance in Istanbul and exhibited at the 13th Istanbul Biennial “Mom, am I barbarian?” in 2013. For these drawings, Christoph devices a very unique method as a means of narration, but more than that, as a means of communication! He draws mostly outdoors, in the street cafes/bars, parks/gardens (bostans), or in the diverse gatherings including mostly the urban political ones in the presence of other people to stimulate and spark a conversation. Such conversations are sometimes getting deeper and create an opening to get to know the viewpoints of others that he met in public. This forms an important part of his multilayered research, which in turn, settles the foundations for his drawings.

I first came across art as a conversation starter in the well-known film “Conversation Piece” (1974) by Italian director Luchino Visconti. The phrase “conversation piece” actually refers to a genre of painting that appeared in Britain in the 18th century. In these paintings, mostly a joyous gathering of a group, or family members are depicted in a garden or park enjoying themselves being together. Certainly, Christoph’s drawings are much different than this genre of painting but function in the same way to spark a conversation. His drawing action/performance in public creates a “spectacle”. So, not only the drawing as an artistic object, but his drawing action/performance becomes a “third thing” (as Rancier called it - “Emancipated Spectator”) that functions as a mediating object connecting diverse subjectivities and proposing an inter-subjective experience; in Christoph’s words, “making unlikely encounters more likely”.

His artistic research process involves a personal kind of wandering, socializing and mingling in the cities. The notion of wanderer/stroller/flaneur is a concurrent theme in the art history such as the “Wandering Jew”, but was articulated first by Baudelaire and followed by others such as Benjamin or Guy Debord (and the Situationists). In his “The Painter of Modern Life”, Baudelaire defines the flaneur exquisitely: “The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flaneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in

the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.” We might say that Christoph’s wandering may be aimless and casual as the Baudelaire’s flaneur but it is intentional as Benjamin’s conception of it: an urban spectator, an amateur detective and an investigator of the city.

Following his interests and passions, Christoph makes unplanned walks and tours like the Situationist “derive” in the cities. Each time Christoph came to Istanbul for research, he was drifting/strolling in the city, meeting with people, making sketches and taking notes. Sometimes, his casual conversations turn into interviews leading one to another. He discovered places and people of his interest, for instance, the Kursunlu Han, a 16th century Cervansarai by the Ottoman architect Sinan, where was converted into small shops and workshops for the specific parts of tools and machines, or Perpa, the contemporary version of it, a distant tool market. Similarly, in Perpa, he came across Fatos, a powerful female entrepreneur for high tech polishing tool heads. Her position also exemplifies the struggle of a woman who comes from a conservative Muslim family. In the “Bostanorama” series, Christoph includes the drawings of Fatos with short notes from their conversation together with drawings of the cervansarai reflecting his dreams of creating a social production place for 3D printers like a fablab.

The “Bostanorama” drawings can be perceived as visual narratives woven with theory, activism and art, accentuating the priority of desire and hedonism in the coproduction of the city. Based on interviews, encounters, and readings during his visits to Istanbul, he visualizes the urban transformation of the city, and also the Gezi resistance. Starting with Nika Riots (February 2013), one of the most destructive social uprisings during the Byzantine period in Istanbul, these drawings feature “Earth Tables” (July 2013), Yedikule Bostans (July 2013), and “Gezi Park Fiction, St. Pauli” (June 2013) among others.

The “Earth Tables” depicts how the simple act of gathering to have dinner together—to break the fast after sunset—can become a means of protest. In the drawing, the people sit at floor tables on Istanbul’s streets and parks during the

month of Ramadan (religious feast), and enjoy eating and protesting together. Christoph visually narrates the new coalitions, in diverse figuration, alchemically formed among the multiple publics during these dinners, such as Muslims, atheists, anarchists, leftists, nationalists, environmentalists, gays, lesbians, and so on. The “Gezi Park Fiction, St. Pauli” drawing on the other hand points out the urgency to connect different urban struggles. It depicts a celebratory moment after the renaming the ‘Park Fiction, St. Pauli’ in Hamburg as “Gezi Park Fiction” on the night of June 16, 2013 when the Gezi Park occupation ended with police-enforced evacuation.

Although these drawings were exhibited in one of the Istanbul biennial venues, their exposure weren’t limited to the visitors. As Christoph states: they have an “unplanned, second, independent life through being photographed, tweeted, facebooked, instagrammed & tumbled”. For him, “this gives a certain sense of (constituent) power, shows the decoding, and is a form of deterritorialisation of art”. The deterritorialization of art he mentions is not only about the migration of images in social media, but, also directly related to the experience of art.

So, now, I want to invite you all to enjoy the exhibition!