



# A MONUMENT OF VIOLENT PARTICIPATION

## MARKUS MIESSEN

‘CONCERNING THE ISSUE OF SPACE, I DON’T THINK THAT THERE IS SUCH A BIG DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHAT YOU CALL MICRO-POLITICAL, MACRO-POLITICAL, AND GEO-POLITICAL, BECAUSE I THINK THAT THIS DIMENSION OF THE POLITICAL IS SOMETHING THAT CAN MANIFEST ITSELF AT ALL LEVELS. IT IS IMPORTANT NOT TO BELIEVE THAT THERE ARE SOME LEVELS THAT ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN OTHERS. IN A WAY IT IS COMING BACK TO WHAT I HAVE SAID BEFORE WITH REGARD TO HARDT AND NEGRI. WHEN WE BEGAN TO ORGANISE THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FORUM, THEY WERE AGAINST THIS IDEA. BECAUSE THEY WERE SAYING THE STRUGGLE SHOULD BE AT A GLOBAL LEVEL. THERE IS NO POINT IN HAVING A EUROPEAN SOCIAL FORUM, BECAUSE THIS AUTOMATICALLY IS PRIVILEGING EUROPE. BUT I THINK THAT IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO HAVE SOCIAL FORUMS AT ALL LEVELS: URBAN, REGIONAL, AND NATIONAL. THE AGONISTIC STRUGGLE SHOULD TAKE PLACE AT A MULTIPLICITY OF LEVELS AND SHOULD NOT PRIVILEGE THE GEO-POLITICAL ONE OR THE MICRO-POLITICAL ONE, BUT INSTEAD REALISE THAT THE POLITICAL DIMENSION IS SOMETHING THAT CANNOT BE LOCALISED IN A PRIVILEGED SPACE. IT IS A DIMENSION THAT CAN MANIFEST ITSELF IN ALL KINDS OF SOCIAL RELATIONS, WHATEVER THE SPECIFIC SPACE IS LIKE (...).’ Chantal Mouffe in conversation with Markus Miessen, November 2006

Monuments are objects. They are of a certain scale. Usually, monuments are designed to be inserted in a topography, into a political landscape of physical matter. Cities are often built around monuments. In their craving for power articulated visually, they use the monument as a means of representing what they are proud of or to extrapolate what they condemn. As far as physical monuments are concerned, the presence of their form reinforces the politics of representation of political powers. They create place. As demarcators of public place, most monuments merely represent box-ticking venues on tourist maps. They rarely create what one could call public space. The Berlin wall became a monument the moment it disappeared. If one thinks about the actual spatial conditions of places like Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, their actuality can never be abstracted. They have become monuments in our imaginary. In *Weisse Folter* (White Torture, at K21, Düsseldorf), Gregor Schneider presents us with a series of

rooms that are accessible to the exhibition-goer: corridors, confined cells, isolation units, interrogation rooms, and zones of extra-attentive surveillance. These spaces are replicated from the information of Camp V at Guantánamo Bay circulating the web. By duplicating rather than interpreting the spatial data Schneider collated, the audience is no longer being fed with pre-produced readings, but with the raw footage itself: the viewer is becoming a producer of images. Such reading of the monument is based on the premise that one needs to experience the spatial condition in order to actualize it. The reality of the space is being tested against one’s pre-existing imaginary. I propose to think of monument as a space of encounter, a space of alternative knowledge production, a space of exchange, and – ultimately – a space for conflict.

Conflict refers to a condition of antagonism or state of opposition between two or more groups of people. It can also be described as a clash of interests, aims, or targets. When we look at conflict as opposed to innocent forms of participation, conflict is not to be understood as a form of protest or contrary provocation, but rather as a micro-political practice through which the participant become an active agent insisting on being an actor in the forcefield he or she is facing. Thus, participation becomes a form of critical engagement. When participation becomes conflict, conflict becomes space. Re-inserting friction and differences into both the scale of the institution and the city bears the potential of micro-political forces that render conflict as practice. In this context, participation becomes a form of non-physical, productive violence. In order for any kind of participation to reach a political dimension, engagement needs to be based on a distant critical voice. This kind of ‘conflictual participation’ produces new forms of knowledge. As a starting point for such model of ‘conflictual participation’, one could make use of the concept of collaboration, as opposed to cooperation, that Florian Schneider describes in ‘The Dark Site of the Multitude’: ‘as a pejorative term, collaboration stands for willingly assisting an enemy of one’s country and especially an occupying force or a malevolent power. It means to work together with an agency or instrumentality with which one

is not immediately connected (...).’

It will increasingly be the outsider who will add critically to discourses in place. Although the outsider will be understood as someone who does not threaten the internal system due to lack of knowledge of its structure, it is precisely this condition that allows one to become fully immersed in its depth. Rather than creating a place that can be visited by people, such notion of the monumental puts forward the tools to enable people to understand conflict as a space of encounter, conflict as a way to engage critically with their environment. This monument has no clear authorship: it migrates, it fosters misunderstanding as a tool of exchange, and can be re-invented daily.

Do monuments have to be politically correct? Can a monument be hacked? Do monuments develop their own intelligence? Do monuments grow over time? ■

MARKUS MIESSEN is an architect, educator, and writer, author and editor of several books, and works internationally as a spatial consultant and editor. He currently works on projects with the European Kunsthalle, the Lyon Biennale, the *Serpentine* Gallery, and the think tank for everyday democracy *Demos*. He has lectured at various institutions including Columbia University and the Royal College of Art, pursues a PhD at Goldsmiths College, and teaches as Unit Master at the Architectural Association in London. [www.studiomiessen.com](http://www.studiomiessen.com)

META HAVEN:  
DESIGN RESEARCH  
AND MIHNEA MIRCAN  
IN CONVERSATION

WITH  
MARKUS MIESSEN

META HAVEN

It seems that not so much communality is under fire, as much as people’s realization that their being-communal is political. Could you anchor the thoughts outlined in your text to a case study or example?

MARKUS MIESSEN

There are several. You could think of the Camp for Oppositional Architecture in Utrecht. You could think of a project of how to deal critically but productively with the spatial realities of shopping malls (rather than turning a blind eye or outright critique without offering alternatives) that was initially planned by *Demos*, the London-based think tank for everyday democracy. But let’s take the European Kunsthalle Cologne as an example. The project started as a reaction to a loss, a lack, a violence. The historic Kunsthalle building in Cologne was knocked down because of a decision by the city government, which promised in return that a new Kunsthalle would be built. Once the existing building had gone, the city claimed that there was no money to build a new one. A grassroots-initiative (*Das Loch e.V.*) of local and regional activists and cultural producers posed the question: what can be done? Instead of trying to find quick options, i.e. to try and raise the money to build a space or accept dodgy alternatives (like the one offered by the city, namely to cooperate with a project developer who was planning a shared, multi-use urban block), the initiative asked the question of what a Kunsthalle actually constitutes today or what actually constitutes a Kunsthalle today. They used an existing conflict to plant another one – thus to use productively the lack of consensus at a particular moment in time. This resulted in a situation in which an interim institution was founded. Consensus, in this case, would have been much easier and would have led to a tangible result. What the initiative was interested in instead was to rethink a model that is already in place through the strategic placement and introduction of friction; one that enables discourse rather than produces place. Participation is best and most constructive if it has clear aims and targets, a clear audience or remit, and knows exactly on what scale it wants to operate. That’s why micro-political struggle is — from my point of view — more effective than macro-political ambition. Here, I do not agree with the simultaneity approach of Mouffe. In the micro-scale, institutional and so forth, effects of conflict can often



be directly felt and can therefore act as a testing ground for larger societal conflicts.

META HAVEN

Is not your disagreement with Chantal Mouffe mainly related to the fact that she, as a post-Marxist political theorist, is basically ready to put the state form and its democratic institutions as such into debate, whereas you wish to address each (smaller) situation specifically? The example of the Kunsthalle clearly shows that an approach of dissent (pro-actively engaging a situation where consensus would have been almost unavoidable given the current state of politics) *can* be enacted without a bigger-than-necessary ideological banner. But can monuments do without such a banner?

MARKUS MIESSEN

This is precisely it. Chantal argues for a change mainly on governmental scale. Although this is only partly true, as she also says that the issue needs to be tackled on all scales, i.e. national, regional, and micro. I guess the reason why I am more interested in the micro-scale is that on this level the articulation of aims and targets is much more tangible. One needs to imagine the micro-scale simultaneously being addressed by thousands of actors, thousands of projects. It then creates a momentum that is far greater than one that is being tested, in only one particular direction, on a governmental scale. This is one reason why I think the approach of Nicolaus Schafhausen for the European Kunsthalle is very valid and points at acute shortages in current discourse of the role that institutions can play in politics. I think participation is most operative if its framework is super clear, if there is a clear audience that one addresses, if there is a framework of the project that one pursues. Monuments could be addressed in a similar fashion – thinking of a monument as a micro-political struggle.

META HAVEN

‘Exchange’, ‘encounter’ and ‘knowledge production’ as terms still sit uneasily with the notion of conflict – if only because the persistence of conflicts (their being unresolved) is only guaranteed by disagreement on the meaning of the exchanges, encounters and knowledge produced. What would be the difference between a notion of conflict *introduced* to consensus-dominated situations, as opposed to a conflict that simply *results* from the ‘passions’ – that cannot be rationalized – of the actors, and thus is *given* to a situation? And – how could such a passion be expressed in the politics of a monument?

MARKUS MIESSEN

Any kind of unforeseen friction, collision of interests that leads to some form of conversation, or meeting of oppositional aims, leads to the production of new knowledge. This is why I keep on bringing up the example of the Serpentine Gallery Interview Marathon

in London, by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rem Koolhaas. As much as the event in itself is very commendable, it produced relatively little new knowledge. I would claim that the reason for this is that most of its actors, participants, and invited guests originated from the same cultural milieu. They were mostly leftist thinkers or practitioners and shared a similar belief in cultural production as a driving force for societal change. The question I posed to them was: what would happen if you invite protagonists from the same fields, such as cultural practitioners, museum directors, curators, artists, architects, politicians and so forth, but also those who do not share any of your ideas, visions or beliefs. Why don't you invite super-conservative practitioners as well? I believe that the collision of the two, or potentially many, streams of opposing thoughts could have generated a conversation that would have taken the event and its results further.

META HAVEN

Here we should try to speak perhaps more in detail about the practices of Koolhaas and Obrist, who both are very sensitive for the talents in other people including those who are ‘on the attack’. What they are in fact capable of is a constant re-alignment of their own positions with emerging ones around them, which they to a certain point seek to include in ways that are simultaneously inviting, competitive and critical. Similarly, we know of a Stanford graduate whose hypercritical thesis investigation of Google brought him a job at Google. This can only happen when what is criticized is hegemonic and therefore can be better joined than beaten. Both Koolhaas and Obrist occupy hegemonic positions in their respective fields. In that sense one could doubt whether ‘progressive-conservative’ would have constituted a real opposition here – as if confronting the progressive Koolhaas with the conservative Prince Charles would have been a solution to bring in disagreement. The key lies not in opinion and visions, but in ‘class’. Perhaps one should have brought in people who can ‘speak for’ a different (class) interest or different stakeholders, not merely people of a different opinion.

MARKUS MIESSEN

I agree. As to the idea of introducing conflict, there are also already very formalized state-political or transnational structures and procedures in place that utilize conflict as a strategic tool. The United Nations follow some conflict strategies in which micro-conflicts are superimposed onto existing situations of conflict in order to try to deal with the source-issue. The concept of introducing other conflicts falls within what is called conflict transformation theory. To answer your question about passion, I do believe that passion is always the starting point for constructive engagement, as without passion any work and therefore its results become mediocre.

META HAVEN

In response to the advent of ‘zero

friction zones’, some scholars argue that an antidote would consist of something like ‘productive conflict’. We think that the ‘unnamed’ notion of ‘being-productive’ here entails, again, some sort of hidden consensus in a machinery that goes unquestioned/ is presupposed. What is your view?

MARKUS MIESSEN

Yes, productive conflict is what I am interested in. Conflict not as a means of provocation, but maybe more as an idea of prompting change through the operational collision of interests that produce new meaning and practice. But first, it seems that we need to define what kind of ‘participation’ we are really talking about. Personally, what I am interested in, and I think here I can speak also for what Shumon Basar and I tried to do in our book, was to look at the issue from a point of view that avoids a certain nostalgia of participatory projects. At a time in which New Labour has turned everything into inclusion and everyone has become a ‘participant’, I think we should rid participation of its innocence and romanticized presence. Instead, what needs to be promoted is a conflictual reading of it: participation not as the process by which one invites people in, but rather, as a means of acting without mandate, as an uninvited outsider forcing oneself into discourses, projects or realities of which one thinks that those might benefit from one's participation or involvement. That doesn't mean of course that there won't be shared authorship. It simply means that the conventional model of the facilitator or good-doer is replaced by an ‘independent outsider’ model, one that strives for pro-active citizenship and challenges given socio-political environments, like an independent, crossbench politician that doesn't associate himself with a particular party. Participation in this sense might also have to do with networking. Not as a means of consensual round-tables, but to collate conflicting voices and perspectives and issues one might wonder about and wishes to access. As to the politics of participation, it is crucial to differentiate between cooperation and collaboration, like Florian Schneider does.

META HAVEN

Current consensus politics require the articulation of unending subjectivities and unending target groups as individual life style choices, rather than political communities. Which would mean that, effectively, any community supposed to recognize any cause for any monument, would cease to exist – simply because such cause would be not recognizable from the individual perspective. How have monuments presupposed collectives – and how is the typology of the monument suffering from the disappearance of the collective?

MARKUS MIESSEN

Life style choices ... Really? I get incredibly frustrated by general politics trying to be all-inclusive, politically

and the furniture. At the beginning of the 20th century however, Ghent University Library was plagued by public controversy about the dreadful state of the building. Before it was included in the Belgian list of ‘protected national monuments and historical buildings’ in 1992, it had been subjected to both appalling architectural interventions and structural neglect. Since 2003, the library staff and several members of the University Community rallied for official, political and financial support for the restoration. As part of this ongoing project, *Battle of Monuments* received approval from the staff and local community as a welcome and helpful initiative. The program meant a considerable step forward in the endeavour to restore the ‘Tower of Books’. Suddenly this was no longer seen as a mere internal affair, but as a common cause. The attention the building received through the program turned a lack of interest – not in the least with university officials who still needed to be convinced of the importance of this building for the institution – into broad support.


But at the end of the highly entertaining battle, one wondered why it had taken a television program to convince people of the historical and architectural importance of the Tower of Books and other competitors. It goes without saying that this kind of television program, due to its undeniable popularity, combined with the faux-democratic format of tele-voting, risks to have a high impact on future official and governmental policy. In an era when politicians seek to behave like celebrities and appear ever more frequently in entertainment programs, it comes as no surprise that they did not feel the slightest hesitation to have themselves guided by the regime and whimsicalities of entertainment and spectacle – instead of setting out their personal policies for which they had been mandated through elections. The day after the final *Battle of Monuments*, Dirk Van Mechelen, Minister in the governmental agency for ‘Monuments and Landscapes’, announced in the media that he was willing to discuss the idea of a ‘battle of landscapes’.

In the aftermath, it was not disappointment but *indignation* that prevailed. A program like *Battle of Monuments* does not merely jeopardize but, fundamentally, *abolishes* the public disposition of monuments. Any discussion about monuments is always one about public domain. But in front of the TV set – when addressed not as a civic being but as a private consumer – one does not consciously enter the public realm but safely remains within the domestic sphere. Hence, a ‘vote’ has no democratic legitimacy, let alone political significance. ■

1 See [www.monumentenstrijd.be](http://www.monumentenstrijd.be)

WOUTER DAVIDTS teaches Architecture Theory at the Department of Architecture of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and is engineer-architect and postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Architecture & Urban Planning of Ghent University. Recently he edited the textual part of *Denkmal ISBN 9080842427*, a book by the Belgian artist Jan De Cock (Atelier Jan De Cock, 2006). His recent scholarly work focuses on post-war artistic attitudes towards architecture and on the architectural nature and identity of the contemporary artist's studio.





correct, and the like. There is an onslaught of fakeness in the idea of a proclaimed participatory democracy. The will, interest, and energy must come from the audience, the stakeholders, and people on the ground.

META HAVEN

Please, let us explain. The formation of political identities on the basis of subjectivity is discouraged most of all by the market. The development of subjectivity is in a neoliberal model no longer challenging any norm, as subjectivity accounts for the permanent emergence of new norms and new marketplaces that are increasingly more detailed and as such also oscillate between the macro-level (of mass culture) and the micro-level (of the individual). The whole contemporary conception of culture industries and the 'creative city' is based on the continuing development of subjectivity as a source of 'buying power'. There is nothing more welcome to neoliberal politics than being different. Is not the monument as a typology completely dependent on the recognition of common causes, and does a lack of common causes (from being political) not contribute to some kind of current crisis of the monument?

MARKUS MIESSEN

It's interesting that you mention the conception of the 'creative city', or one could also say the city that is characterised by islands of professionalism, according to what you call the buying power. The deliberate act to describe society as one that is characterized by differences is something that, especially in Dubai, is incredibly evident. I just returned from the Emirates, and one could say that, and I think you are right, the creation of all those free zones and particularities such as 'Humanitarian City' and 'Dubailand' point at the fact that there is a lack of what you call 'a common cause'. Dubai has taken this to a new extreme: a city in which the public realm is characterised purely by the emergence of islands. In the context of the monument what I think is crucial to observe is the typology of the 'Labour City', a new, government-operated sub-city that houses construction workers. What is interesting here is that the government thinks of it almost as a monument to the workers, i.e. for the first time in Dubai's über-construction phase to build a 'space' for construction workers in which they can live in a different way than they used to when they were purely locked up in the camps outside the periphery of the city (Sunapur in particular). What the government is doing there is a response to the ongoing criticism of Western media. A media they rely on in terms of getting investments and tourism. Whether they are in the end interested in caring for the workers doesn't matter. The government found itself in the situation that there was no other way out than to act. Yet, I would argue that the actual monument here is not the physicality of 'Labour City', but rather the ongoing writing and observation by journalists and critics.

META HAVEN

What about the United Kingdom, where you live?

MARKUS MIESSEN

In the UK, we are at an historic low in terms of popular participation in political structures and frameworks while there has never been more claims as to why and how people should participate in politics. In terms of our book, of course one can only understand it as a first step, a trigger, an initial spark. It looks at a wide range of practices. Nevertheless, they are also very limited in the sense that what the book is really trying to bring to light are the spatial practices that one might understand as the often hidden forces – varying in scale – that produce political space. It's like being a curator: ultimately, what you do is killing. You make choices of whom to eliminate.

As to your point about the disappearance of collective, I do agree that this is one reason why a monument as such is, today, difficult to deal with. We live in societies in which, most of the time, we act as individual capsules maneuvering through space without interacting with our professional, public, or private constituency.

In terms of the book and the way we envision the role of architecture and urbanism, we have framed it from various perspectives. It is an attempt to expand the praxis of architecture in the sense that it analyses what is often understood as 'social and political givens' through the reading, mapping, interpretation, and – ultimately – challenge of spatial conditions. Architecture as spatial practice has a specificity to it that is ancient. We try to remove the myth that it is the architect who is in charge of space. From human rights abuse, temporary occupation, the issue of scale, architectural interventions, to urban warfare and alternative spatial knowledge production, the publication should be understood as a critical documentation of an emerging movement that renders an optimistic, propositional outlook on future practice. It's time to get involved!

MIHNEA MIRCAN

Going back to your ideas on monuments from the text which triggered this conversation, I would say you articulate the matter in a markedly ambivalent way. You start with a generic refusal and then mention the possibility of a confrontational return to the monument, whereby the monument 'resists' through the very fact that it allows for being hacked, that it allows for an aggressive inscription and registers it as such. So a monument is possible inasmuch as it motivates and supports counteraction, even polarizes various forms of counteractions.

Markus Miessen

I am not interested in nostalgic monuments. The monument becomes interesting when it opens up gateways to the future, when there is a small door through which one can imagine actions yet to come. I am

currently designing and curating (together with London-based architect Ralf Pflugfelder) a space for the Lyon Biennale that is opening in September 2007. The concept is pretty simple: we both share a growing interest in what one could call a 'European Space'. What does it constitute? Is it physical? Is it imaginary? Does it belong to someone? There are countless questions, each very different from the other. What I find fascinating is to see what happens when two people come together and confront their difference in understanding of a European Space. The way we will approach this in the show is through a simple roundtable at which visitors will be asked to become 'architects' of a shared space, to visualize or design their European Space. However, they shouldn't just simply draw it on a blank piece of paper, but superimpose it onto other people's visions, corrupt them, extend them. Let's hope for conflictual negotiation rather than sheer terror. It is the inscription of layers here that we are interested in. Of course, also in this scenario – although we are in no way trying to create a monument – the spatialized script can only exist as an interpretation of the actual gesture it tries to describe.

MIHNEA MIRCAN

You say that monuments generate a space – either wittingly or reluctantly – where some sort of resistance can be enacted. So the monument becomes something of a catalyst, if not the hubris, in a social theatre. To simplify matters, the monument embodies antagonism, while other understandings and performances of the social will necessarily be deployed around it in response?

MARKUS MIESSEN

Monuments, of whatever kind, always generate a space: the space they physically – or, in the case of, for example, a web-based monument, they virtually – circumscribe, and the space of performativity, the space of reaction and encounter. The monuments can be an accelerator, yes, but it can, of course, also be a decelerator of sorts. Chantal Mouffe distinguishes between two scenarios in which the dimension of antagonism can be expressed in society: antagonism proper – which is the friend and enemy relation – and the concept of 'agonism', as an alternative way in which oppositional positions can be played out. I am much more interested in the latter. In that case, we are faced not with the friend-enemy relation, but a relation of what Chantal calls 'adversaries'. Her reading of it is based on the notion that adversaries are 'friendly enemies'. They've got something in common. They share a symbolic space. Therefore there can exist between them a conflictual consensus. They agree on the ethico-political principles that inform the political association but they disagree about the interpretation of those principles, a struggle between different interpretations of shared principles. For me, what is important in this is to unravel the potential to undo the in-

nocence of participation. I am much more interested in responsibility and exposing the violence of participation. In this context, it could be useful to think through a concept of 'conflictual participation' as a productive form of interventional practice. When I mentioned this to Chantal, she used this as a means to critique globalisation, to expose the strategy of participation as a buzzword that in many situations exists simply for people to exploit themselves. And this is definitely not what I am trying to propose in terms of a framework for monuments here. I just thought I better make this clear. We need to realise that participation can also be very dangerous.

MIHNEA MIRCAN

You asked a question about the monument that develops its own intelligence over time. Are you implying that the monument becomes in this case indistinguishable from the very social processes it has activated or instigated – a monument with life?

MARKUS MIESSEN

I am very interested in the notion of the Tower of Babel. The idea could have been taken much further, to create a utopian, conflictual social matrix. This is also why I find boats very interesting; those on which you stay for a week or so. One has to constantly (re)negotiate micro-territories that you yourself cannot control. It forces you to deal operatively with conflicts rather than fight them out from your habitual point of view. In terms of the tower, it would be interesting if it was a collective endeavor, i.e. like an ant- or bee-colony, with micro-pockets in which continuous conflicts occur. They become really productive. Until pretty recently, it was business-as-usual for archaeologists to study monuments and pay minor attention to the everyday lives of the societies that created them. But for me, those are the pressing issues. Questions of agency and authorship. The question of 'who am I addressing'. The question of conflict. Hirschhorn's monuments are interesting when thinking of a monument with life. They also have a lifespan, which is usually quite short; they create public space for a particular duration, critiquing the monument as such, introducing a construct that works through reflection. In 'Altars', Thomas Hirschhorn argues that it is the memory that constitutes the monument rather than the physicality of the object. I am very fond of that. What I find most interesting about his piece for Documenta is the placing of the 24hrs webcam that allows people from all over the world to trace the temporal processes of his project. It allows for another population to witness the performative aspects of his piece, while producing individual monuments of thought. They in themselves become participating performers of the artwork. Here, the simple act of witnessing through observation turns into something that is considered an ephemera that in itself produces a notion of monument. A monument of reflection. ◆

