

Apolonija Sustersic's Artistic Research

Peio Aguirre

Apolonija Sustersic's participation in Santiago de Compostela is significant for two reasons. On the one hand, her analysis of the social, political and economic conditions that shape the aspect of cities today merges with a new critical sensitivity towards the urban debate; and on the other, her artistic research infiltrates, like a virus, a web of power-based relationships involving artists, politicians, urban developers, architects and citizens, where the off-centred symbolic capital characteristic of art serves us as a study tool.

One of the preconditions we encounter on studying her work is that the widely commented "powerlessness" of art with regard to apparently superior structures must be queried. De-hierarchised and revised, this "powerlessness" is not diluted in an ocean of innocuousness, but—and considering these relations of base and superstructure—functions laboriously as an antidote against the apparent supremacy of these power structures.

It has often been said that what characterises capitalism is its ability to carry off its latent contradictions while reproducing the patterns and modes of production. The specific economic models used in concrete situations can be exported, transferred and adapted to other contexts. Mutation, germination, grafting, parasites and fungus can all serve as metaphors of this expansive process, which is applicable to urban economy and growth. The success or failure of repeating models, from the "Bilbao effect" to the cosmopolitanism of Barcelona, will depend on how well local and particular values are accommodated by the models into which they are inserted. The idea that globalization eliminates local cultural differences has veered towards that of a globalization firmly rooted in values such as singularity and tradition. The macro-project of Santiago's City of Culture, designed by the architect Peter Eisenmann, is comparable to other similar initiatives in other parts of the world, and the resulting conclusions will always be useful in optimising the coincidences and differences before putting them at the service of the "already decided".

Citizens' and social groups' incapacity when faced with such macro-plans is frequent in urbanism: the decision-making by whoever has decided what and for whom. Architecture and urbanism, despite their often imposing physical materiality, are inherently invisible practices in

which the “already decided” is the fruit of a complicated correlation of forces. Activating spaces of reflection to cover these voids is one of the tasks that Sustersic has set herself. In the context of her project in Galicia she has written that “if ever there was a Moral Code in the architectural profession, then it has been supplanted by the Code of Business, which has led the architectural profession into a very limited and uncritical field of operation. It has turned into nothing more than a service; a service for whoever needs it—a king, a priest, or a thief at the service of any possible ideology”.¹

After studying architecture in Ljubljana, Sustersic moved to Amsterdam in search of wider horizons, where she began to exploit the critical possibilities of art. Her practice (for this is foremost how her work should be seen: as a praxis) garners procedures from both fields as well as applied design and other social sciences. Collaborations between artists and architects (and critics and curators) often produce situations of rupture and negotiation. One of the key terms here is “research”. She maintains that art should engage more with other professions and then it would perhaps reveal itself as a more quotidian activity. A “transdisciplinary” approach such as this is absolutely indispensable when attempting to analyse contexts as variegated as the urban fabric. Sustersic’s artistic research combines practice and theory to pursue a method of reflection in which the provocation of crisis leads to a scenario of alternatives and spaces for hope.

For Professor Henk Slager, this “research is often understood as a method stemming from the alpha, beta and gamma sciences directed towards knowledge production and the development of a certain scientific domain.

How is artistic research connected with those types of scientific research, taking into account that the artistic domain so far has tended to continually exceed the modernistic parameters of knowledge management? One could claim that the artistic field comprises the hermeneutic questions of humanities, the experimental method of science, and the societal commitment of the social sciences”.² It emerges from this that artistic practice and artistic investigation can merge into a single branch of study in service of society without having to pass, necessarily, through the chain of the market. The gradual specialization of areas of competence in any

¹ Apolonija Sustersic, “Reprogramming Disaster?”, *A Cidade Interpretada*, Santiago de Compostela, 2006.

² Henk Slager, *Artistic Research*, W. Annette and Henk Slager (Ed.) Lier en Boorg, Amsterdam, 2002.

profession, whether in architecture, urbanism, or any other, means that *professional dislocation* occurs as rapidly as disciplinary control grows. In this sense, art can be a displaced profession, a free space that gathers tools and uses from other fields and puts them to work and test reality. The relevant question here is that if artists don't do what others are supposed to do, nobody does. Clearly, architects and town planners do their job, but seldom from the perspective of other critical analyses that might query their legitimacy. A government asks for a new building to be made and an architect designs it, but the architect doesn't question the political interests that have given it the go-ahead—and someone should. The territory of art, as a constantly shifting ground, offers alternatives on a horizon where critique, creativity and imagination mix into one. The artist, the architect, Sustersic, can work as a sociologist, anthropologist, interior designer and town planner, all at the same time. Concurrently, because of this multiplicity, her architectural baggage helps her to maintain a distance with regard to contemporary art, put problems into perspective and broaden the limits of the artistic context. This is the most pragmatic sense we can give the term artistic research: namely, the occupation of temporary spaces that have been abandoned and their prompt recovery for the benefit of their ethical and social reactivation.

Another of Sustersic's features is the creation of channels of mediation that allow communication between the various co-participants and protagonists at the core of her projects: students, artists, town planners, theorists, children, neighbours. Platforms of mediation that foster a public sphere of participation and debate are often shaped through workshops and meetings; i.e., where informal conversation mixes with investigation. The workshop as an artistic medium also closes the gaps between the educational and the aesthetic, and is a tool that she uses in her teaching, for she has created the Department of Permanent Transformation (D.P.T) at the Royal University College of Stockholm.

“Which social problems can be solved by architecture?” “What is the role of the suburbia?” “What is its contemporary identity?” “What is its role today?” “How much space for creative ideas is still left beyond the market?” “What makes a city worth to live in?” These are some of the questions thrown up at the start of a workshop. Like this, Sustersic opens up areas for many other people, scholars in geography, different kinds of sociologists, experts in urban processes and other such like. A round table on the “future city between the Global Market and Social

Democracy” can serve as a platform on which to bring together those responsible for the aspect of our cities and visual artists.

This question of research also covers artistic structures, museums and other institutions. Contextual art and Institutional Critique set the historical precedents necessary for a familiarisation with a practice that lays great emphasis on physical, mental and psychic space and on the codes governing it. Movement, perception and sensitivity are but some of the ingredients of a sensorial and cognitive recipe.

Sustersic’s reflection on the institutional framework is in tune with the institution’s ability to integrate criticism almost as a form of subsistence cannibalism. The museum today is a space where the transgression of its limits has taken centre stage and become “museumfied”. Its immune system has developed in such a way that it has assimilated the venom poured by critics like something exuded from their own organism. In other words, the institutional critique, centred on a critique of the “white cube”, is already part of the absorption process activated by the institution’s immune system. New structures for contemporary art and culture almost invariably carry hidden economic interests.

A project like *Community Research Office*, IBID Projects, London (2004), is a practical case study of how the white space of an art gallery can affect the urban and social fabric around it. For instance, here “research is a process of investigation and collecting information. The experience of gathering, interpreting, and documenting information, developing and organising ideas and conclusions, and communicating them clearly through the final publication is an essential part of this project. By researching the subject we will be collecting information on the subject as well as speculating on the future with our suggestions”.³

Based in the east end of London, this *office* is a semi-public space, half-way between the “white cube” of the gallery and the civic centre that reflects the changes occurring outside. The whiteness of the space, initially evocative of an art gallery or an empty room, is a metaphor of the process of gentrification (of the “white cube”?) the area is undergoing. Coined by the sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964, the term “gentrification” refers to the eradication of the local population—typically in working class or run-down areas—as an effect of interests in the sectors of real estate, business and finance. Typically, the opening of an art gallery in the area signals

³ Apolonija Sustersic, *Community Research Office*, IBID Projects & Revolver, 2004, p. 12.

the start of gentrification. “Public Space to get, let, or buy by Private Capital” reads the notice stuck on the door of IBID Projects by the real estate agent to advertise property in the vicinity.

For radical geographers such as David Harvey, the issue of the price of land goes hand in hand with speculation.⁴ The corporatization and territorialization of public space through private investment is a common feature in this present trend for importing models. Culture is the place today where monopolistic rents reach the highest prices. Gentrification and the “white cube” not only function well as a metaphor. Moreover, Susan Buck-Morss has highlighted the tendency to use the culture industry as an economic motor: “Museums have become hubs for urban redevelopment and centers for entertainment, combining food, music, shopping, and socializing with the economic goals of urban revival. Museum success is judged by numbers of visitors. The museum experience is important—more important—than the aesthetic experience of the artist’s practice. It does not matter—indeed, it might be encouraged—that art installations are one-line jokes; that fashion and art fuse into one; that museums shops morph connoisseurs into consumers. Meanwhile, artists, the emblems of freedom, are present in the museum experience in a ghostly fashion, as traces of creative work, as wish-images of non-alienated labor, playing an imaginary role—parallel, perhaps, to that of basketball players whose presence haunts the store of NIKETOWN”.⁵

But a gallery (or museum) is also a place where a community can come together. Calls to use artistic spaces as meeting places for communities and minorities constantly pepper discourse. What *Community Research Office* sets in circulation is a public service, a critique of the built environment, a meeting place or forum, and a channel of intersubjective interaction. From the “white cube” to the civic office and back again. From the political gesture of the occupation of spaces typical of Situationism to an “aesthetic of administration”. On a similar line, *Visual Cookie—Simulation Café*, Visualise, Carlow (2002), brought together the people of Carlow, Ireland, as part of an “as-yet-undecided” situation in which they exchanged thoughts on the new contemporary art museum that was due to open in the area. A

⁴ David Harvey, *The Art of Rent. Globalization and the Commodification of Culture*, published in Spanish in “Capital financiero, propiedad inmobiliaria y cultura”, by David Harvey and Neil Smith. Ed. Macba/Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, 2005.

⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, “A Global Counter-Culture?” in *Thinking Past Terror*, Verso, London/New York, 2003, p. 69.

competition to design a biscuit that represented Carlow was the pretext to bring together this abstraction that museum discourse calls “the public”, “spectators”, “minorities”, “consumers”, etc. It is interesting to see this project as the progressive extension of design in to each and every corner of our surroundings. The design of a biscuit, insofar as it represents the shape and taste of a place, must be read here with the distance afforded by the alibi. In any case, its subtle critique connects with the idea about contemporary design’s propensity to explore what motivates our aesthetic choices, and the advent of a “total design” whereby architecture and design seem to actively endorse brand labels and the value of business.⁶

In *Visual Cookie*, the activation space was designed as “just another lobby”, similar in function to others developed by Sustersic. The need for new formal infrastructures goes hand in hand with the flexibilization of art institutions. A reform policy is a reflection of how institutions undergo changes as a result of renovation and updating. Sustersic’s *Sputnik Lobby* (2002) was a piece commissioned by the Kunstverein in Munich that redesigned the museum’s entrance. Fixing up and refurbishing these intermediary spaces in art centres has been a constant theme since the 1990s, as has the design of comfortable places to read, chat, relax, eat, drink and explore the archives of the institution. The “tertiarization” of the institution was just the next step. These spaces function as places where the so-called (and now so reviled) Relational Aesthetics allies with the “archivisation” of art, as Conceptual Art did in the past. Sustersic’s design for this (now eliminated) lobby was a simple space composed of a small counter of the kind one finds in bars, and walls which had been painted orange and cappuccino-colour. Cappuccino was the director’s favourite drink. The choice of colour reveals the subtlety of Sustersic’s decodification of the detail and sign.

The choice of this colour-concept—in reality an abstraction of its real colour—ultimately served as a comment on the progressive “cappuccinofication” of public space. It was a wink directed at the spread of Starbucks and Costa’s all over the world, and the economic consequences that gentrification is bringing to cities. The progressive tertiarization of public space and the changes that have occurred in cities as a result of multinational capitalism set against cultural industry as the principal tool and motor. Incidentally, the other colour chosen for *Sputnik Lobby* – orange –

⁶ See Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)*, Verso, London/New York, 2002, pp. 13-26.

also carried meaning since people of Munich would associated it with Social Democracy of the 1970s.

Sustersic's intervention subtly ranges from interior decoration to economic comment. Large cities are witnesses of these processes; wherever these chains start to appear we know that changes in consumer habits and in the real estate sector are about to happen. This ties in with Sustersic's diagnosis of "white cubes" often being a part of the gentrification process.

Any colour can contain a comment of institutional critique. A simple cup of Italian coffee taken anywhere in London can, in fact, give rise to an entire case study. Take Francesca Café, situated in the area of the *Community Research Office*: after 25 years in business, the owner is now forced to shut up shop because of speculation.⁷ The story repeats itself time and again in many urban areas.

Similarly, when the sociologist Richard Sennett analysed over a period of 25 years the changes in working conditions undergone in an Italian-owned Greek bakery in Boston, one of the arguments he heard was that the loss of pride in the baker's trade was not only the result of technological progress and the emergence of social and ethnic class, but also of the association of the flexible and the fluid with the superficial. Shiny surfaces advertising global products generate a flexible production process. Consumers' habits mould consciences and are responsible for urban regeneration. One of the consequences for Sennett is that we have a democracy of consumers instead of a society of classes.⁸

Questions such as How do we want to live? How are we going to live? and How did we use to live? can be addressed from a number of angles and postures. By encouraging an awareness of public space we will be helping to improve conditions for future state-subsidized housing. If to be "utopian is to be pessimist of the real or an optimist of the ideal", to quote Emmanuel Wallerstein, then to try to find the best living conditions at all times is a realistic project. Apolonija Sustersic's "suggestions" constitute per se a modest but radical intellectual gesture. A "meeting situation" similar to that which the artist is to develop in Santiago de Compostela, *Bonnie Dundee – A Meeting Place in the Garden (after Patrick Geddes)* (2005) hooked up with the utopian current that characterised the visionary architecture of the 19th

⁷ *Community Research Office*, op. cit. p. 102.

⁸ Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character. The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1998.

century and its subsequent influence on 20th century town planning, with Geddes, a thinker who imagined the future of the city of Dundee at its centre. Hindsight enables us to see what has become of dreams that were projected into the future. As Leidse Rein, Utrecht, Hackney and Dundee before it, Santiago de Compostela now has the chance to think and imagine its future.