
Urban Art by osa as a Laboratory New Approaches to Urban Architecture, City Planning, and Community Building

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Abstract

Urban art by the Office for Subversive Architecture (osa) functions as an artistic-architectural laboratory. By merging reality and fiction within temporary public interventions and participatory projects osa aims to be exploring new approaches to urban architecture, city planning, and community building that are triggering and evoking alternative and interdisciplinary forms of public engagement, encompassing both creators and recipients, makers, and consumers, inviting everyone to look at, think about, and inhabit the post-industrial city differently, since there has been a huge shift in the discourse of modern cities in general as well as of urban/suburban spaces in particular during the last twenty years. At least, that is true for among those creatives, who occupy themselves professionally with the phenomenon of global metropolises and megacities, i.e. architects and planners, artists, and theoreticians. With this exemplary contemporary urban art collective, it is especially true of a younger generation not so much influenced by the ideological and aesthetic debates of the sixties, seventies, and eighties any longer, but the current actor-network idea.

Keywords/ Tags: osa, new urban art, urban imagination, public intervention, participatory installation, artistic lab, community building, social design, scenography, network idea

1. Introduction: *The Office for Subversive Architecture (osa)*

Over the recent years, the manifold urban interventions and various temporary installations in urban space by osa - *Office for Subversive Architecture*¹ can be seen as a new form of collaborative architectural research, cooperative design experiment, and participatory creation of user-oriented, highly inclusive art which is easily accessible to a wide audience in the public sphere. Public art hereby is utilized as a kind of artistic-architectural laboratory for creating the urban anew with alternative, or rather subversive, forms of ephemeral architecture, temporary interventions, and long-time city planning or identitorial placemaking. Creative responses to specific urban situations and the necessities as well as urgencies of our time beyond “decorative cosmetics“ might then open and suggest a new path to greater public engagement and civic co-creation, for example by artistically enhancing the functions and roles of public space in cities or by establishing social interaction and active participation, shared (emotional) experiences, and mutual encounters. The creative reinterpretation and aesthetic transformation of public space by artistic imagination might facilitate the sustainable regeneration of the urban in the end, and even more, discuss the idea of ownership of urban space anew. However, it is not considered a substitute for politics though.

Thus, all started with such a social encounter: The artistic-architectural network group *osa* originated in 1995 as part of a collective student project in Germany at Darmstadt University, in the Department of Architecture, and begun to grow as a self-commissioned, actor-oriented and self-authorized flexible network of several young, not yet fully established practitioners, living and working in London, Hamburg, Berlin, Frankfurt, Munich, Dortmund, Graz und Vienna respectively, but with similar fresh ideas on architecture, urban planning and design. From then on, their consistent aim as a self-organized, yet loosely connected and international creative collective has been to develop an innovative and alternative approach to reinterpret architecture in the city and to foster civic participation within un-commissioned, not directly commercial workings as well as highly transdisciplinary cooperation. From the beginning, their ephemeral, thus mostly temporary, urban art projects and “un-solicited“ site-specific interventions/installations have also become a striking form of self-employment as well as self-promotion for getting-up as emerging talents and young members of the so-called “creative industries“ — especially by crossing, blurring, and blending the boundaries between art, design, and architecture, varying from minimal or moveable public installations to the construction of actual buildings and huge spaces. Despite their remarkable, spectacular, and often challenging nature, their non-autonomous, legal, and even commissioned urban art projects, however, are mostly not primarily provocative or critical in a cynical or merely activist and deeply political sense. Yet, their urban art projects always focus on the subversive transformation of the actual architectural and historical environment of the city here and now, by critically merging reality with fiction or the artificial as a kind of principle. Herewith, *osa* generates a disruption in the daily-life urban scenery by stopping people in their tracks, making them think, and establishing a surprisingly alternative communication and social dialog in the contemporary cityscape. *osa* therefore develop manifold urban art projects from a strong direct creative response to city site, as a kind of playful attempt to enrich and enhance public space in the contemporary city through different degrees of “scenographic fictionalization“ and “real virtualization“.

Thus, often “real“ urban elements become parts and props of *osa*’s subversive transformations and structural mutations of urban spaces without even losing their original purpose, but then with new performative or scenic components integrated. With much creative fantasy and artistic freedom, *osa* is actually playing with the built modern city as it exists, but revitalizing its dead functions in an impulse of repair and act of optimism, and thus regenerating and reconfiguring urban reality. In so far, their characteristic way of urban hacking, crossing and jamming can also be described as informal “exploits“.

2. Some exemplary Urban Art Works by *osa*

The following few exemplary urban art projects by *osa*, discussed in chronological order, shall further illustrate these theoretical preliminaries and give a short insight to their artistic-architectural techniques and specific methods as well as subversive strategies, that are always in direct response to a found and given situation, and in sum, represent a serial method of site-specific interventions and installations, each time according to some already established characteristics of urban art today.



Fig. 1 - osa: Anwohnerpark,
Cologne 2006, Photo: ©osa.

2.1. (Fig. 1) *Anwohnerpark*, Mural, Cologne (2006): Amidst a rather unspecific and desolate quarter in the right bank of the German city Cologne, a transition zone between new-built fairgrounds, old residences, and a mix of former industrial spaces the signs and marks of a dreary parking lot were mirrored in a mural on a flanking huge fire wall. This massive wall probably belongs to the largest art studio complex in Germany, the PlanWerk. In the accompanying artists' statement on their website we read: „Mit der ästhetischen Kraft dieser ebenso alltäglichen wie abstrakten Grafik wird nicht nur ein öffentlichkeitswirksames Icon an prominenter Stelle in einen strukturell schwierigen Stadtraum eingebracht, sondern auch ganz nebenbei das Problem der Anwohnerparkmöglichkeiten bei anhaltendem Druck der Messe auf benachbarte Flächen auf einfachste Weise nachhaltig gelöst.“² (“With the aesthetic power of this common as well as abstract graphic, a publicly effective icon is not only implemented on a prominent spot in a notorious structurally problematic situation in urban space, but at the same time the problem of the residents' parking possibilities are also being effectively solved in the easiest way working against the sustained pressure from the traffic of a fair area on its adjacent.”) Since then miraculously the parking had doubled overnight...



Fig. 2 - osa: Zum Geburtstag gibt's Torte, Frankfurt 2006, ©osa / Photo: Norbert Miguletz.

2.2. (Fig. 2) *Zum Geburtstag gibt's Torte*, Frankfurt am Main, Schirn Kunsthalle, 2. September 2006: This fancy “Happy Birthday Cake”, a spectacular, officially commissioned public installation for Frankfurt’s Schirn Kunsthalle building, on the occasion of its 20th anniversary, opened on September 2nd, 2006. The gigantic blow-up of a festive party decoration transformed the iconic architecture of the postmodern art building by architecture office BJSS just for one single day and night into its own huge birthday cake. The playfully circular, event design-oriented celebrative scenography was then visible from all over the city in different, multiple perspectives just for a full day cycle of 24 hours.



Fig. 3 - osa: POV/ Point of View, London 2009, Photo: ©osa.

2.3. (Fig. 3) *POV/ Point of View*, London (2009): A viewing platform for the 2012 Olympic Games in collaboration with the English *Blueprint* magazine. *Blueprint* and *osa* took direct action and built the first viewing platform for the 2012 Olympics in London. At 6 a.m., on June 12th, *Point of View* was secretly built and erected, without official permission, in form of a stair-like structure painted in regulation Olympic blue. *osa* placed the intervening structure alongside the official fence that surrounded the future Olympic park, not so much in an illegalized act of provocation, but rather as a gesture of friendly curiousness, full openness, and great enthusiasm for the upcoming games — a spirit then seemingly unknown to the many official bodies organizing them and developing the East London site then. So it wasn't just seeking and leaking information about the expensive building program, that is hard to come by. Access to and views of the location were just nearly impossible for the curious visitor and interested public to obtain then. Thus, *osa's Point of View* was installed at the official blue fence on the greenway as an act of parasitism and mimicry, next to the point, where it crossed the Lea River. The integral installation only lasted around 60 hours, during which time it was used by the public, before being silently removed again by the same *Office for Subversive Architecture*.



Fig. 4 - osa: Eintritt frei, Berlin 2010, Photo: ©osa.

2.4. (Fig. 4) *Eintritt frei/Entrance free*, Volksbühne Berlin, July 16-August 28, 2010: Some additional fake columns on the front side barricaded the well-known theatre building in Berlin during its annual summer break, while the title of the subversive architectural intervention was paradoxically as well as sarcastically suggesting free admission to everyone... Thus the work seemed like a short, but pointed joke, that further on intimidated the audience, but also provoked general discussions among them, which social groups have access to cultural programs in the city.



Fig. 5 - osa: Kölnisch Wasser, Köln 2010, Photo: ©Ulrich Schwarz.

2.5. (Fig. 5) *Kölnisch Wasser/Eau de Cologne* has been an interactive urban installation for *plan10*, a well-known forum of contemporary architecture (2010) in Germany: On the occasion of the event, *osa* was proposing an ephemeral water surface in the center of the square in front of the local Schauspiel Theatre. The concept follows the logic of the classical motif of placing a play of water or a decorative fountain in the centre of a square, which in this case will only be a mundane puddle though. As a new interpretation within the current ecological as well as economical climate and its current aesthetics, it not only fits into the somehow neglected appearance of this public square and its dull surrounding elements, it also provides—en passant—a new multi-sensual experience, a moment of a new identity just for the duration of the event. Since the water surface is also offering the spectator new perspectives and reflections of the overall configuration of this forgotten public space. A row of white Wellingtons is inviting the passers-by to interact individually with this urban intervention. The title of the work alludes to a famous Cologne consumer product (Eau de Cologne) whose striking brand color is also cited here.



Fig. 6 - *osa*: *Discharge/ Recharge*, Urban Lights Ruhr/ Bergkamen 2013, © *osa* + © Photo: Johannes Marburg | Urbane Künste Ruhr 2013.

2.6. (Fig. 6) *Discharge/Recharge*, Installation/Transformation, Laser, Radio Play, Bergkamen (2013): As part of an Urban Lights Event in the Ruhr area of Germany, *Office for Subversive Architecture* collaborated with artist and philosopher Christoph Rodatz on an architectural performance of light and sound that focuses on a hovering tower block in the center of the Ruhr area city Bergkamen. Simultaneously a landmark and a brutalist eyesore from post-war Germany, this massive urban structure had been unoccupied for about 15 years and was now due to be demolished at the end 2013. As a farewell, the building had been painted matte black signifying its ominous fate, death, and disappearance, but at the same time transforming and reviving the metallic icon into a huge shrouded sculpture above the small post-

industrial city “expressing the total absorption of light to symbolize the obliteration of [the tower’s] life” and at the same time turning it into a gigantic public screen for the projection of an absorbing laser show at night that tracks the story of this doomed city tower. Interviews undertaken with former inhabitants were transmitted via a local radio channel situated on the top of the dark tower, allowing visitors to tune in on their own devices while enjoying the gigantic spectacle. Since then, the Bergkamen Citytower has disappeared without a trace, as the demolition was completed by the end of 2014.



Fig. 7 - osa: well, come, Ruhrtriennale/ Dortmund 2016, © osa + © Photo: Volker Hartmann | Urbane Künste Ruhr.

2.7. (Fig. 7) *well, come*, Dortmund Harbour, 2016: On the occasion of the festival Ruhrtriennale osa intervened on the site of the SAZ’s steel processing plant in the city harbour of Dortmund. In *well, come*, commissioned for the Urbane Künste Ruhr section, curated by Katja Aßmann, an industrial works building constructed for loading goods is temporarily transformed into a functional walk-on platform, which is as open for encounters as the transshipment point itself.³The garishly pink-colored installation vehicle was working as an expression of the manifold movements of goods and people around the globe nowadays: “Tatsächlich widmet sich ‘well, come’ den Strömen, die um die Welt reisen. In einer Erläuterung zum Projekt heißt es: ‘Millionen und Abermillionen Güter sind global in Bewegung. Jedoch wird mehr bewegt als Kapital, Bodenschätze und Waren. Schon immer sind auch die Menschen global unterwegs. Menschen, die migrieren oder einfach reisen, solche, die Geschäfte machen, Menschen, die auf der Flucht sind. Damit ist auch das Paradoxe markiert: Wir befinden uns in Zeiten, in denen alles global unterwegs ist, und gleichzeitig beobachten wir eine Tendenz zur Abschottung.’”⁴ (“In fact, ‘well, come’ is devoted to the streams that travel around the world. An explanation of the project by osa states: ‘Millions and many millions of goods are moving globally today. However, more is being moved than capital, mineral resources and goods. People also have always been traveling

globally. People who migrate or simply travel, those, who do business, and people, who are refugees. This also marks a paradox of our times: We are in a time ,when everything is on the move globally, and at the same time, we observe a tendency towards foreclosure and new borders everywhere.’’)

On the whole, the *Office for Subversive Architecture* should not merely be seen as a professional office or flexible creative network for the global age, but rather as an open laboratory, encompassing both creators and recipients, makers and consumers, inviting everyone to look at, think about and inhabit the city alternatively and anew, since there has been a huge shift in the discourses and perception of cities and of urban/suburban spaces in the last years. At least, that is true for among those, who occupy themselves professionally with the phenomenon of shrinking metropolises and global megacities, i.e. architects and planners, artists, and theoreticians. Within this exemplary contemporary urban art group and their site-specific workings, it is especially true of a younger generation, that is not so much influenced primarily by the ideological and aesthetic debates of the sixties, seventies, and eighties any longer, but by relational aesthetics and the actor-network idea—creating platforms for exchange and new venues by experimenting in real-time micro-nodes, and thus, inviting everyone to look at, think about, and inhabit the modern city anew and differently.

As bottom-up city planners they are actively taking part in current processes of global urbanization with small-scale model transformations and subversive reinterpretations of found urban realities, that build a new form of subtle and striking criticism by activist and subjective artistic self-expression, rather than by sticking to just theorizing and giving big-headed manifestoes. It is all about staging experiments and taking microprobes instead of creating more masterplans.

In the end, in each of these minor single artistic urban explorations and playfully transformative experimentations, which can be compared with small-scale experiments and model arrangements in a laboratory, *osa* are actually altering imaginaries for creating broader real changes in urban spaces, that on a larger scale might be contributing to urban renewal and a new urbanism in the near future. Operating as a dislocated active research collective without one single “real studio space“, yet technologically connected, further allows extending the creative process into everyday life, bending the functional structures of a laboratory to the flexible informality of an open and variable creative network, which constantly constitutes itself by an ongoing series of workshop-projects that stimulate social encounters between its audiences in shared moments of social involvement, creative performances, emotional experiences and last, but not least, common spectatorship.

At the same time, when it comes to acting versus planning, here urban planning has more and more turned into a specific form of contemporary urban design, which is also characteristic and significant to the idea of the so-called “creative city“ and its constant commercialization and consumerization nowadays. However, new alliances and collaborations between design, art, architecture, and the city—in times of shrinking cultural budgets and rising demands—are forming the “creative city“ today. No wonder that sometimes, urban art is already in danger of being instrumentalized for upgrading and up-valuating the city. Creating atmospheres, triggering special experiences, and emotionalizing by visual story-telling are all crucial elements in the play here, while we all observe the continuing decline of public spaces through privatization and commercialization for example, that occupy and even oppress processes of urbanism and urbanity nowadays.

Like with *osa*, this new alternative and subversive form of bottom-up city planning, that pragmatically engages with the modern city as it exists in the here and now, is currently achieved by the art of disruption, which means by developing specific forms and versatile methods of changing perspectives, irritating, hacking, and jamming, by flipping and twisting, re-coding, and reconfigurations, mis- and re-appropriation, fakes and fictions, inclusive as well as participatory scenographic practices, and new innovative models of (inter-)action, that on the whole, relate to the complex demands and central discourses of contemporary urban spaces and redefine them for a global age. Thus, this specific art practice as part of the transdisciplinary urban art genre is not so much a matter of taking over the tasks and routines of professional urban planning, but rather opening up creative alternatives and new experimental perspectives on the larger city-planning as well as the socio-political challenges of migration and globalization today.

Conclusion

What characteristics as specific categories do now define the urban, we may ask further. It seems the old definitions won't fit here any longer—in current processes of urban globalization and in times of transcultural migration. At least, unsolicited architect-artists and unplanned city developers like *osa* do not act as the power controlling urban “revaluation” top-down anymore, but rather as an actively participating, generously collaborating, constructively engaging, socially mediating, and identity-establishing authority highly interested in local expertise. They bridge the gap of seemingly disconnections between the work of architects and urban planners as well as the citizens and the efforts to re-interpret cities made by theoretical disciplines such as the modern social sciences, urban anthropology, political ecology, or political philosophy.

Instead, they also favor the democratization of city planning, and hereby, they are the more challenged with having to operate in two conflicting registers simultaneously: On the one hand, addressing a general public in the city; and on the other, of course, a group of experts, peers or critics with their disruptive experiments and artistic innovations. Since in the end, the temporary interventions and participatory installations are judged like any other public art—whether they be original, aesthetically surprising, unprecedented, striking, skilled, innovative, or authentic, and somehow contributing to any relevant current discourse or political issue of our time.

osa's sometimes entertaining and playful interventions correlate to professional processes of city planning, developing, and implementing new structures and functions for cityscapes insofar as their subversive and highly intellectual approach, combined with an artistic will to create refined, complex, and subversive aesthetics as well as alternative identities for the city, generate surprisingly new functions and roles to public spaces as well as to the public sphere in general, thus becoming alternative communicative nodes and social venues in a given territory by virtual fictionalization as well as by factual virtualizations.

Here finally, their creative appropriations as well as misappropriations of the existing modern city in the here and now contribute on an exemplary micro-scale to some major problems of today's notions of contemporary urbanity. Be experimental, and just try it!

Endnotes

1 - See all urban art projects by *osa* documented on their official website under <http://osa-online.net/>. Many thanks to Oliver, Anja, Karsten, Bernd, Britta, Anke, Ulrich und Sebastian from *osa*, who have answered so many questions about their work over so many years now.

2 - See artist statement on <http://www.osa-online.net/de/flavours/strange/plan06/anwopark/about.htm> [Accessed July 2017].

3 - See the full description and video documentaries of the latest project *well,come* on the official Website of Urbane Künste Ruhr on <http://www.urbanekuensteruhr.de/de/projekt/2016-welcome> and <https://www.ruhrtriennale.de/de/produktionen/welcome> [Accessed July 2017]. See further Renate Puvogel: "Städte des Ruhrgebiets. Die Rolle der Kunst. Gutes und gut Gemeintes. Ruhrtriennale - Festival der Künste in der Metropole Ruhr, 12.08.-24.09.2016", in: KUNSTFORUM INTERNATIONAL 242, 2016, 280-282. And cf. Simone Melenk on <http://nordstadtblogger.de/die-fuenf-tonnen-schwere-kunstinstallation-welcome-von-urbane-kuenste-ruhr-im-saz-dortmund-im-hafen-ist-eroeffnet/>; and Frank Kaltenbach: "Soziale Architektur. Grenzgänger zwischen Architektur und Kunst" on <https://www.goethe.de/de/kul/arc/20869612.html> [Accessed July 2017].

4 - See <https://www.fh-dortmund.de/de/news/2016/08/kunstinstallation-schwebbahn-lockt-in-den-hafen.php> [Accessed July 2017].

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