

on the w@terfront



Nr, 2 February 2000

Maggie McCormick

artist and curator. Urban Art Group Melbourne

private-public-private the public domain at the beginning of the 21st century

KULTURAL KOMMUTING

At the beginning of 1998, I went to Berlin. I went to see and feel the city of Berlin in the late 1990's. I went to experience an urban space in massive transition. I went to see how art and artists operate/respond to/influence the public domain in a city as complex as Berlin..... and I went to meet the German artists who were part of the Melbourne/Berlin public project, 'Kultural Kommuting'.

'Kultural Kommuting' brought together 18 artists in Melbourne and Berlin, to work on a year long project, with public installation outcomes in both cities.

The concept of 'Kultural Kommuting' grew out of numerous discussions between Claudia Luenig (the co curator) and myself, about the role of art and artists in public life and public space in contemporary cities.

Our interest lay specifically in the links that could be made between Berlin and Melbourne because of the parallels we observed in both places.

We were interested in exploring the process and outcomes of linking artists who did not know each other, and were geographically distant but close in their approach to their art. The closeness was of course our perception, and we left the artists concerned to discover or not discover, what this was.

We were interested in working in 'the space between'.....the public space of the Internet, the fax machine and the telephone as the points of connection. We were also interested in the public outcomes of these personal engagements intervening at the interface between the private and the public in both cities. The transitional point.

Claudia Luenig and I were both curators and participating artists, creating an opportunity for both ourselves and others to explore these ideas.

The artists worked in pairs. One in Berlin, one in Melbourne. They did not know each other and some did not share a common language. What they did share was that they lived and worked in an urban environment, in two cities in a state of change.....two public domains in transition.

The artists were asked to send a 'travel kit' to their partner as a means of introducing themselves and the public face of the city they lived and worked in.

Claudia Luenig collected many objects in the streets of Melbourne, labeled and packed them in plastic bags and sent them to Ralf Schmitt in Berlin. Ralf traveled all over Berlin 'losing' these Melbourne objects, leaving them in public locations throughout the city.....to be 'found' by an unsuspecting Berlin public.

Paul Nuttney sent a camera with images of Melbourne on the film, to his partners. They shot the film again creating a double exposure of the two cities.

Yvonne Kendall faxed her diary pages, the inner thoughts of a city dweller, to Henning Eichinger. He faxed them back to her, but written in the third person and illustrated. Over many months, a book evolved.

I took photographs of public projects, that I had done in Melbourne, that critiqued the public scene there. This included a 12 storey building installation in Melbourne's central business district and a second installation titled 'art/ectural' where architectural images were installed into the architectural framework of the building itself.

I cut the photographs of these large scale installations, into small pieces, so they became independent images in their own right.

My partner placed these in public sites all over Berlin and re photographed them.

Collaborative outcomes from these partnerships were installed at a subway space and public city transport shelters in Melbourne in March 1998, and in public stairwells in Berlin and Melbourne in October of the same year.

BERLIN

When I was in Berlin, I stayed in the Mitte district, in the former East Berlin. I arrived to find a doorway in a state of reconstruction, after making my way through pipes and digging and rubble, and a skyline filled with a linear network of cranes.

The view from my window changed daily, hourly. Each time I walked though the door something had changed. When I left some 2 weeks later, the entrance door was crisply painted and the pavement outside was flat, but when I turned the corner to take my usual route to the U-Bahn, the construction chaos had moved to this street and I needed to find an alternative route.

The effect of this transitional public space could be seen in what many artists were doing and thinking. The chaos was unsettling, but also invigorating with a risk taking edge. Many empty building spaces were temporarily transformed into public space for art and dialogue, before work commenced to change them into private apartments.

The site in Berlin where Kultural Kommuting was installed, was a stairwell in what was once a bus station. The space had been taken over by artists and transformed into Galerie Treppenhaus.

The Berlin public space was filtering through doors and windows into the private, domestic domain as well. One of the artists in Kultural Kommuting painted his former coal shoot pure white, all one square meter of it, and invited the public and the media into his domestic space to view the exhibitions that take place in this space.....and they came, temporarily transforming a private space into a public space.

The breaking down of the distinction between the public domain of outdoor space and the private domestic interior is an interesting blurring of edges. The technology of our time brings the public into the intimacy of our private, domestic space. The screen of the computer and the television are the point of transition. Although people are dispersed in private units, they are drawn together as 'a public', as public television images are viewed at the same time or emailed messages cross geographical distance.

LIFE IS A CONSTRUCTION SITE

'Life is a Construction Site'. This is the title of a German film I saw recently and struck me as good description of the urban public domain at the end of the 20th century not just the urban landscape of Berlin but cities across the world.

Melbourne is one of these cities, with its City Square redevelopment, multiple refurbished office buildings into city apartments, Federation Square, Riverside Park, Melbourne aquarium, new museum, redeveloped National Gallery, City Link, Tullamarine Gateway and the new city of Docklands.

TRANSITION

The contemporary city in transition is the constructed expression of ourselves, our own personal transitional state of being. Berlin and Melbourne are two contemporary cities at the end of the 20th century that reflect this perhaps better, than at any other stage of the history of the city.

From the fall of the Wall in 1989 to the move of the parliament to Berlin just a week ago, Berlin has been in a constant state of transition.

Having now experienced this city it makes me even more appreciative of Christo's wrapping of the Reichstag. Through this transitory act, a moment of stillness was created in the midst of a state of super public activity. A moment to 'watch this space' and consider the past and the future. These moments are rare in such cities.

PUBLIC/PRIVATE

What is happening in both these cities ? Melbourne and Berlin.

In both cities we are witnessing an ongoing, changing sense of ownership, sense of what is 'public' and what is not, and an ongoing changing definition of the concept of 'public'.

In Melbourne, at the beginning of the 90's, I initiated an art space,

'No Vacancy', in a row of vacant shop fronts in a prime central city location on Collins Street, the Regent Theatre and the then City Square, and opposite the Melbourne Town Hall and the then apparently thriving business, Georges. Previous to the economic down turn of the time, these

had been commercial shops and restaurants.....private businesses. In 1990 the vacant buildings were owned by the City of Melbourne, who were happy to support this artist initiative. Artists occupied this space, responded to the space itself and the urban environment it was part of and the public who passed by. The space was transformed into a public space for four years, by the intention of the artists who occupied that space and gradually by those who viewed the space and its non gallery/non commercial approach. It was a different way of doing art and viewing art.

With the up turn in the market, Melbourne has become a developers paradise. The shop fronts are now about to become up market shops, the building above is residential apartments, the Regent Theatre has been refurbished and is an operating theatre and the City Square has disappeared under a hotel development. Back to private space. Private space that needs a public presence, a paying public presence, the public as consumer, to survive.

The definition of what is public and what is private is never completely clear, ever changing and always in a state of transition.

Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. Once an empty space between two ideologies, is now owned by the corporate world who are constructing both a private and public stage for a powerful 21st century play to take place on. The red 'Info Box' contains a corporate gift.

The transformation of the working dockland area of Melbourne into 'The Docklands' is creating a city within a city, and a construction site on a similar scale to Berlin. The development equals the existing city of Melbourne in size and currently has its own local government with its own rules and regulations.

In both cities the public realm is becoming increasingly private. The line between the two is increasingly blurred. Public space is being sold off and the whole public sector diminished. At the same time, new public space is being designed and developed.

POWER

These new, designed urban spaces with their private and publically funded public art projects, throw up questions of What kind of public space is this ?, What kind of public art is this ? and Who decides what appears in this public/private domain ? What controls do such private owners have over where and what appears in this private/public space ?

Who will control what we see, do and say in the public domain of the 21st century ?

In an age of economic rationalism and privatization ...corporate man would seem to be the answer....but is it ?

A NEW PUBLIC ZONE.

ART AND ARTISTS IN THE 21st CENTURY CITY.

As the traditional public realm disappears and becomes increasingly privatized, artists are creating and controlling a new public space, that links urban locations in cities across the world. This is the space that projects like Kultural Kommuting occupied.

Artists are creating a new public zone. They are creating a new art for a new century.
Redefining art and artists, and the public function of art and artists in contemporary society

Artists in this contemporary public zone view themselves and others as the public ...they are seeking a public dialogue. An audience is an inactive viewer. A public is active. Dialogue is not an art lecture.

What is being sought is a critique of urban space and urban life.

This is not a social role but rather a political role in the sense of the polis ...a place of exchange of ideas. To do this effectively is the challenge for the 21st century.

This paper was both presented at "watch this space - conference on public art. University of Newcastle. (Australia) and Waterfronts of Art, Barcelona 3 - 5 September 1999