

Reviews

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Performing with buildings: A review of the work of Diana Wesser 2007

Place: -

the route there
 the invitation to enter
 the furniture to sit rest on
 the materials to touch
 the location (in the city)
 the other people there
 the price of entry
 the time of day
 the weather
 the amount and type of light
 the wind
 the sounds
 the smell
 the events happening afterwards
 the events happening before
 the time of year – season and social
 other events in our lives
 the physical quality of our bodies
 the clothes/shoes we wear/choose
 the amount of sleep
 who we met last week, last month
 when we were last here
 who listens
 who can listen
 who can understand
 the premise of having these questions

Context

In 'Collaborations: The Private Life of Modern Architecture' Beatriz Colomina writes, 'Critics and historians are shifting their attention from the architect as a single figure, and the building as an object, to architecture as a collaboration' (Colomina 2000: 462). In this inter-disciplinary move architectural production becomes less a functional ideology than a more networked and complex system: a way of interacting with the world. Through the lens of the work of media and performance artist Diana Wesser, this review investigates the implications of approaching architecture in this way for building objects and public space.

1. For a greater discussion of this idea of spatial perception see Kaufman, E. (2002). 'Living Virtually in a Cluttered House,' *Angelaki* 7: 3, pp. 159–169.
2. See www.Leipzig.de for a summary of Leipzig as a tourist destination.
3. See Goffman, E. (1990), *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, London: Penguin.

Frameworks

The way we perceive the space around us is premised on a multitude of assumptions: conventions and rules that have material bearing on the way lives are lived.¹ These conventions do not merely describe or represent, they intervene in the world, functioning to organise its 'social character'. They instigate a 'framework of intelligibility' which 'captures bodies in stable forms' maintaining explicit propositions about bodies and places and deciding what types of utterances may be 'legitimately' extracted from them (Gatens 1996: 182). Here, architecture becomes a key participant in performative acts that mark and delineate different places, bodies and ways of living, evoking certain scripts through specific cultural and constructional codes according to time and context.

The reconfiguration of public space into a potential multitude of different, overlapping conventions, is a key aspect of the work of Leipzig-based media and performance artist Diana Wesser. Post GDR, Leipzig is a shrinking Eastern European city trying to forget its past. Through a program of demolition and regeneration the socialist era is being systematically erased.² However, this transition from 'east' to 'west' is resisted by a legacy of constructions in the physical environment and in the mindset of its residents; abandoned and empty spaces have become symptomatic of this transition. This particular urban condition provides the material for Wesser's work. Through videos, performances and participatory projects she provides a critique of the city, specifically focusing on performativity and dramaturgical aspects of everyday life. With reference to the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, her work explores how actions are dependent on time, place and audience; how one human being presents itself to another through social performances based in cultural values, norms and expectations.³ The primary focus of Wesser's work is the disruption of these performances. These 'productive disruptions' examine the effects of the built environment, its influences on how people rest, move and live, and are used to investigate social and cultural codes – how they become apparent in the body and its spatial interactions.

Productive disruptions

Situs Operawas a 40 minute performance executed in December 2006 that investigated the acoustic and visual memory of Leipzig Opera House: its theatrical codes, gestures and patterns of movements of staging and audience. The performance took place in a small public 'refreshment room' at the top of the building. The glass entrance doors were closed, creating a typical picture stage, and the performance moved in and out of the space while microphones transmitted sounds from within to the audience who sat outside. Modified opera music at an accelerated tempo, slowed down arias from the early nineteenth century, live-improvisation and singing mapped the acoustic memory of the building. At the same time, the performers worked with the gestures of opera singers and audience in a comparable way using repetition, modified speed, exaggeration and diminution of the movements to reproduce visual echoes (Image 1).

In Situs Operathe liminal space of the refreshment room was used to challenge the social constructions of aesthetic and cultural codes that situate audience and actor in binary oppositions. By accentuating its



Image 1: Glass entrance doors to an overlooked public refreshment room create a typical picture stage by which to unravel social codes latent within Leipzig Opera House.

Source: Diana Wesser, Hermann Heisig, Ole Schmidt and Chris Weinheimer, *Situs Opera*; 2006 (Copyright: Best Picture Point).

properties as a space overlooked for self-dramatisation it actively demonstrated a situation where the boundaries between staging and real life are fluent, highlighting the fragility of such oppositions which attempt to capture bodies in stable forms. *Situs Opera* explored how gestures and sound can be used to unravel social codes latent within public places. Conversely, the performances *Dancing about Architecture* and *Spatium Lindenau* investigate how practical actions can be used to create new subject positions within apparently desolate urban situations.

Dancing about Architecture and *Spatium Lindenau* were a series of performances choreographed with Hermann Heisig in 2005. *Dancing about Architecture* translates the impulses of a dilapidated factory into movements. The atmosphere, the abandoned rooms, the traces, the rhythms and patterns of movements in the architecture inspire the improvisations of the dancer. At the same time, the videos not only document the performances but also create a new spatial structure through editing (Images 2 and 3). *Spatium Lindenau* investigates movement impulses of new wastelands in Leipzig's quarter Lindenau. This area is particularly affected by vacancy and deconstruction, producing fissures in the urban fabric. By exploring these fissures alongside children already playing there the performers created a dialogue that moved between the built and the lived. In this way, the performances focused on actions and gestures in processes of inhabitation that produce a physically registered yet anecdotal topography or set of haunted sequences rather than a functional urban landscape or city (Images 4 and 5).

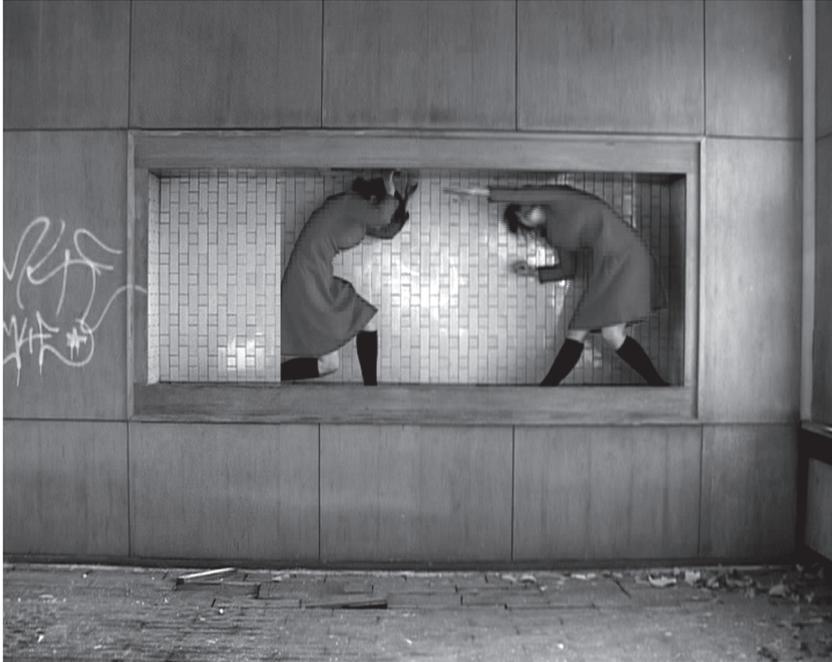


Image 2: The impulses of a dilapidated Leipzig factory are translated into movements.

Source: Diana Wesser, *Dancing about Architecture*, Leipzig 2005.



Image 3: Rhythms and patterns of movements in the architecture resonate through the dancer.

Source: Diana Wesser, *Dancing about Architecture*, Leipzig 2005.



Image 4: Actions and gestures investigate movement impulses of new wastelands in Leipzig's Lindenau quarter.

Source:Diana Wesser , Spatium Lindenau2005 .



Image 5: The performers create a dialogue that moves between the built and the lived.

Source:Diana Wesser , Spatium Lindenau2005 .

Performative urbanity

Within the discipline of architecture traditions of central, organising and transcendental thinking work on the premise of 'building as a fixed entity or a given stable object' (Grosz 2001: 6). They proceed according to a series of binary oppositions such as 'form and content, site and plan, public and private,' (Grosz 2001: 96) and entail an acceptance in the role of the built environment as the 'containment or protection of subjects' (Grosz 2001: 59) rather than engaging in dialogic interaction with their production. Wesser's work challenges such thinking. In her performances the performers in fact become audience. It is the city that performs to them. Each performance focuses on spending time inhabiting and 'looking hard at unremarkable corners' that the city presents (Bradby and Lavery 2007: 47). Overlooked and leftover places – side rooms, staircases, wastelands – provide material for gestures that re-code public arenas into a series of personal choreographs and private territories. This change of focus, from the public to the personal, allows the city to alter; and creates places that speak across their prescribed functions. Never simply objects, building here is performed as unfolding series of processes and practices; moments in every day lives measured out, productive of and produced by daily rhythms, routines and practices.

Reviewed by Helen Stratford

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Contributor details

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