

Crossbenching – Interview with Markus Miessen

Konjunktur und Krise?, No 2

18. Juli 2013, Markus Miessen

Federica Bueti: I would like to start from the very beginning, from a simple question that could help us to contextualize your practice. When and how did you become interested in participatory practices? And what interests you in a collaborative approach?

Markus Miessen: I spent three years between 1998 and 2000 in Glasgow after which I moved to Berlin for a year. This moment in Berlin at the tail-end of the 90's was very interesting; when I moved to London in 2002 for further studies at the Architectural Association, my belief in the potential of architecture had almost diminished and I was hoping for it do be revitalized, which – thankfully – it did. In the late 90's one could witness a very interesting phenomenon in Berlin, which was that many architectural practices had moved towards participatory approaches, and I was really sceptical of this. In retrospect, one realizes that many of these practises were the result of an economic crisis in architecture: practitioners simply needed to define and inhabit a niche, a margin of opportunity. However, it wasn't exactly the case that they had originally set out to become social workers.

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- Andrea Knobloch bei Ist Facebook eine neue soziale Skulptur?

When I finished my studies at the AA, I started a research-project called Did Someone Say Participate?, which I developed throughout my post-graduate work and later in a book, co-edited by Shumon Basar. In it, we attempted to give a non-romantic overview of what we thought of as interesting and challenging practices, which redefine the way in which we look at and understand the production of space today. What they all had in common was that they rethought the relationships between the participatory and their own role as independent actors, they set out to interrogate the often romantic and nostalgic participatory practices that are or were at play. Not in the sense of them inviting others to participate, but in the sense of immediate single-handed involvement, pro-active agency and authorship.

This project provoked a series of projects and on-going inquiries in regard to the subject of participation and collaborative approaches in the fields of architecture, spatial practice and art, from a distance so to speak, from an outsider's perspective. I am interested in the role of someone, who is not – by default – assuming the



19 hours at the kiosk, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2012; commissioned by Valerie Smith; spatial design and programming by Studio Miessen. Photography by Eugster and Affolter.



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character or position of the good-doer, but a passer-by, an observer, who is attempting to understand a particular phenomenon, or cliché one might say

– and then to act upon it without being entangled in its intra-politics. I tried this through projects such as *The Violence of Participation*, which was a project at the Lyon Biennial as well as a publication, ›*The Nightmare of Participation*‹, a more theoretical work, and ›*Waking Up From The Nightmare of Participation*‹, which presents a reflective anthology of texts by authors, who are critically dealing with and interrogating *The Nightmare of Participation*.

The text (NOP) was always thought of as a starting point, a trigger so to speak; to throw something in the ring in order to start a productive conversation around a particular subject. These projects were thought of as a set of different species of work around a single question. I am now working on a book called ›*Crossbench Praxis*‹, the actual propositional work, which essentially is the PhD I am working on at the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths in London

and which will both present a thesis towards an alternative type of praxis as well as a series of examples, which will act as case studies, work that I have produced as an architect. Since 2002, when I was still studying at the Architectural Association, I have been working through a sort of agency or platform called Studio Miessen,

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Photography by Eugster and Affolter



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through which I have been collaborating with a very differentiated set of practitioners. The way that I tend to work is instead of pre-empting project-teams or working with a set structure in an office, I assemble working groups in order to approach every context with the necessary specificity.

Participation, collaborative practices, self-organized practices, autonomous, independent and community-based practices, are all terms used to describe working modalities in the cultural field. However, this seems to be the mantra of the moment, collaboration is somehow what and how we are expected to work in seemingly open neoliberal working environments. What I found interesting in your approach is that you try to destabilize the dominant consensual model of collaborative practices by introducing the figure of the ›uninvited outsider‹. How does this figure function in relation to the neoliberal demand for collaborative labour?

I think there are two things to recognize here: one is that we need to be very careful when considering participation and collaboration as practices per se. What does this really mean? There is often a slight romanticization involved, which goes hand in hand with a nostalgia that relates to and calls for the 1960s and 70s. My understanding of collaboration is neither one of auto-exploitation nor one, which exploits others. I think everyone is responsible for him- or herself. As a collaborator, you should always follow your own, opportunistic agenda. You can always say no. Only when people with different agendas meet there is actually a productive outcome, which produces new ideas or concepts. One has to set up professional frameworks and working mechanisms in order for this dynamic to eventually turn prolific.

To get back to your question regarding collaboration, what I would like to promote is a frictional and potentially dissensual production towards a common goal, which

is in fact the whole point about collaboration in the first place: working with friendly enemies. In each project the force-field of actors needs to be redefined. Otherwise one should rather think about partners as pre-empted consensual colleagues to cooperate with over a longer period. The creation of the role of the Uninvited Outsider and Crossbench Practitioner is an attempt to propose a model in which participation is radically rethought: moving away from the romantic idea of all-inclusive democratic processes, where everyone is invited to the round-table to add one's point, which – from my point of view – ultimately will lead to watered-down and weak consensus. I think we need to work towards the notion of the first-person-singular actor, an independent actor with a conscience. Collaboration can only work if there is something in it for everyone. But this does not mean that it needs to turn into uncritical and consensus-oriented cooperation.

Where does the model of the crossbencher stem from?

What I am referring to when I talk about Crossbench Practice is a specific role that I am developing, which works towards an independent and pro-active individual without political mandate, who retains an autonomy of thought, proposition, and production. This role entails that in a given context one neither belongs to nor aligns with a specific party or set of stakeholders, but can openly act without having to respond to a pre-supposed set of protocols or consensual arrangements.

Especially in the context of the recent culture crisis in the Netherlands the role of the crossbencher – as they call the independent politician in the über-conservative British House of Lords – becomes increasingly relevant. I am hijacking this role from this conservative setting in order to (mis)use it as an analogy: it proposes a way of acting, in other words a practice, which operates on the basis of alternative and self-governing political parameters. Crossbench Practice aims to open up a fresh debate, not as a theory, but a way of acting politically.

I think what we need today is a new vocabulary to describe our practices. I recently watched a documentary on Bob Dylan, ›Don't Look Back‹ and in one scene he complained about that fact Times magazine defined him a Folk Singer, but he wouldn't consider himself a folk singer. In this sense, there is a fundamental problem of how to define a practice without forcing it to fit a limiting definition or consensual model. Is there any way to define participatory practices differently? What terms do you propose to describe your practice? How would you position yourself in the general field of the discourse around the definition of ›participatory practices‹?

I think you are absolutely right; it all comes down to the question of one's role, and the way in which this role becomes productive from the point of view of praxis. Historically, architecture, as a profession, is very interesting in this regard. During the Renaissance the architect was thought of and taught to be a polymath. In reverse, what we are witnessing today is that architects tend to be, both by education and personal choice, highly skilled and super-specific experts, who are very good at catering for one particular item within the complexity of construction, but are often not equipped with the gear that it needs in order to understand and act upon the complex cultural specifics around a particular project. Someone else can easily replace them; and that makes them expendable. They become office robots. It really reminds me of the great recent movie *The Expendables*, starring essentially the whole bunch of getting-aged action-superstars, from Sylvester Stallone to Bruce Willis, Arnie and Dolph Lundgren to name a few. This stuff simply does not fly any longer.

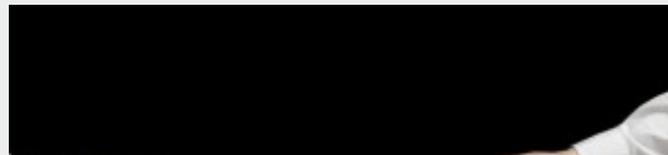
I am not so much interested in thinking about what genuine participatory practice may be or entail. From my point of view we have in fact been trying to theorize it too much over the past two decades. What we instead need to do is to force ourselves into contexts into which we have previously not been invited, redefine our position,

and demonstrate that we can deal with the cultural complexity that surrounds contemporary spatial production. To rethink participation, I would like to introduce the German word ›Einmischung‹(intruder) to our conversation. Germany's former minister for foreign affairs, Joschka Fischer, poses an interesting example in this regard. He is essentially a self-educated thinker, who first became active during Frankfurt's 1969 student revolution in which he played a pivotal role as a non-student. He then, later, decided against armed resistance and became one of the founding members of the German Green Party and their first minister. Under the Labour/Green government led by chancellor Schröder at the tail-end of the 1990s Fischer became minister for foreign affairs. He is really the only person I can think of, who fully physicalized and turned into praxis Gramsci's notion of the long march through the institutions. Absurdly he was the one that was for a long time the focal point of critique within the German Green Party and the Labour Party, which is quite telling I think. As we know, the Left is best at auto-critique and not so productive in terms of coming up with turning into practice counter-proposals. Although one can of course criticize particularities about his decision-making in the past, Fischer can and should be understood as an interesting case, someone who has been interested in the framework of democratic structures, but not for the sake of the structure itself, but in order to generate and stir change. This also means that the party in which one is a member is only a means to place oneself in the larger formal-political structure, which is the parliament. I do not believe that Fischer was ever very interested in intra-party politics and consensus. In this way, he could be compared to a crossbencher, although he is not, at least not from the point of being a fully independent actor.

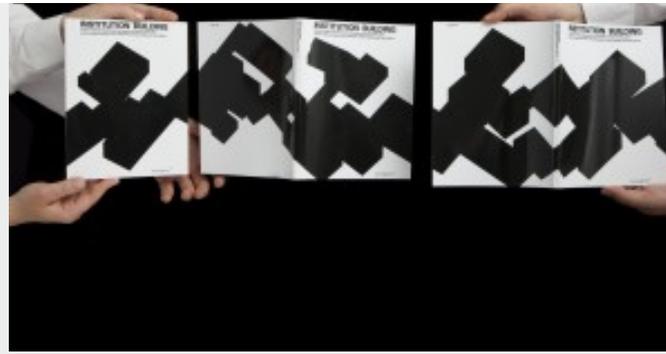
Fair point and difficult task. To think about structure, not for the sake of the structure, but in order to generate and stir changes, how does this translate into your practice?

To start to answer this means to start to think about, rethink and interrogate the role of the architect and the role that architecture with a big »A« can and should assume in society today. In order to ask what is new knowledge in architecture today, one must ask or rather define what architecture means in the first place. Over the last two decades the role of the architect, at least viewed from a critical perspective, has been interrogated and developed substantially. The question of what does one consider to contribute to the production of space is one that circulates around the potential effects on space and how those effects and affects are and can be generated, amended and influenced – and who are the people and practices in charge of those proliferating changes. Architecture with a big »A« can only assume relevance again once it assumes responsibility: responsibility in terms of negotiating, mediating and enabling relationships and conflicts that individuals and groups, whether public or private, can perform within space. Anyone interested in a subject of societal relevance will by default realize that any reality is based on complexity. »A«rchitecture deals with precisely this complexity: socially, and therefore politically, and spatially. Where critical and collaborative research, first-person singular participation (i.e. »I contribute«), and individual dedication towards an ethical position question the modalities of practice, new sets of knowledge are being generated. This is the way in which I hope to practice. Sometimes this works more successful than at other times. Some of my projects are dealing with a-physical frameworks, such as a consulting project I ran for the last two years for the Dutch art organization SKOR, together with Andrea Phillips. Here, the main question was how, as an external observer, you could help to redesign the organizational and content-related »software« of an institution.

In other words: how can you alter the way in which the institution functions on a day-to-day basis, what is its goal,



what kind of programme to they produce, how do they speak to different sets of audiences? Together with Nikolaus Hirsch, Phillip Misselwitz and Matthias Görlich I worked on a project for the European Kunsthalle (Cologne) called Spaces of Production. The project conceptualized, tested, and practically applied a spatial strategy for the European Kunsthalle. The investigation did not result from purely theoretical or conceptual considerations, but was the result of the activities incorporated into the European Kunsthalle's founding phases' two-year work practice from 2005 to 2007. Our spatial strategy for the European Kunsthalle was the direct result of applied research – an iterative investigation informed by resonances between theory and practice.



Institution Building; edited by Nikolaus Hirsch, Phillip Misselwitz, Markus Miessen, Matthias Görlich; Sternberg Press, 2009; photography by Matthias Görlich

In the past I have also worked on several architectural-scale projects for institutions such as Performa Biennial in New York, an archive and film-set for Manifesta in Murcia, an interior for Archive Kabinett, a Berlin-based discursive forum and bookshop. These three projects were done in collaboration with my former partners at nOffice (Miessen Pflugfelder Nilsson).



Backbench, Manifesta 8, Murcia, Spain, 2010. Spatial design by nOffice (Miessen Pflugfelder Nilsson). Photography by Pablo Ferao.

At the moment I am working on projects with the Witte de With in Rotterdam, Powerplant in Toronto, an office space in New York, the Winter School Middle East (Kuwait), an NGO in Los Angeles, a public forum in Gwangju, and the development of a rural art centre in the greater Frankfurt area.

But my practice also concerns teaching, writing, editing, sometimes curating. However, I would still introduce myself as an architect.

Teaching and writing is very important for me. The constant exchange stimulates thinking in all sorts of directions. Also that one is constantly being exposed to different backgrounds and nationalities that sometimes just laugh at one's own suggestions is very healthy.

The concept of participation and the term crisis seems to be equally present in current discussion about cultural politics. It seems that the two concepts are closely linked, they complement each other as indispensable parts



Winter School Middle East, nomadic, currently based in Kuwait; founded and directed by Markus Miessen, co-director Zahra Ali Baba; www.winterschoolmiddleeast.org



Gwangju Biennial On Site, a community Hub for content production, 2011. A project by nOffice (Miessen Pflugfelder Nilsson). Photography by JomgOh Kim.

within contemporary political rhetorics: crisis is the problem, participation the therapy. Do you think that collaborative practices can help to ›solve‹ or to survive the crisis? How do collaborative practices work in a time of crisis and how does a crisis play itself out within the space of a collaborative practice?

I think your point about participation being understood and used as some form of therapy is brilliant. Modes of participation have, in terms of state politics, but also on smaller, less formal scales, most recently been used as a kind of placebo. Just look at the United Kingdom or The Netherlands. What was once thought of as a pro-active mode of individual engagement has been cleverly revamped as a populist tool to regain a larger consensus, even if agendas do not add up or meet. However, there is the question of what we are really talking about when we talk about crisis? Are we talking about a content crisis or an economic one, which then leaves us with infrastructural changes that have an effect and affect on the cultural landscape? I think there is a danger of calling everything a state of crisis today. This is similar to the danger of refereeing to the notion of urgency. If we only ever deal with the urgent we may in fact forget the important. Collaborative approaches can on the one hand be sustainable while on the other they can produce and foster specificity, which would otherwise be very difficult to achieve.

You have recently been appointed Professor for ›Critical Spatial Practice‹ at the Städelschule in Frankfurt and on many different occasions you have expressed the need to define spatial practice in terms of a »critical modality«. Could you elaborate on this concept?

What I am doing in Frankfurt is to set up a framework through which one can critically think, learn, and pose questions about and around the production of space; not only in terms of a theoretical construct, but also in regard to specific spatial problematics. The most important question in architecture, to me at least, seems to be: how can we, as practitioners, manage to be involved in some of the most pressing societal issues and questions. I think the way to do this is not to get too bogged down on the nitty-gritty of the building or construction processes, but to understand the cornerstones of spatial design and to be able to curate the very complex cultural territory and its processes, the many different stakeholders, interest groups, benefactors, sufferers et cetera. This is where the role of the Outsider comes in as a very productive character. The problem of course is that it is a very thin line: you are either a morally responsible individual with a conscience or a fucked-up autocrat with neoliberal intentions – there is not really too much space that one could inhabit in-between those two polar conditions. What is fantastic at the Städelschule is that it offers me the possibility to open up the process of investigation across different student communities, from architecture, but also from the different art studios directed by Douglas Gordon, Simon Starling, Tobias Rehberger, Willem de Roij or Isabelle Graw, to name a few. Students are coming to my studio with very differentiated personal agendas, which makes it a real pleasure to teach there. It is not about communicating hard skills, but to carefully sensitize the group as to how one can act in space: how one's



Architecture + Critical Spatial Practice, annual newsprints, edited by Markus Miessen, design by Matthias Görlich, Städelschule Frankfurt, 2012/2013, www.criticalspatialpractice.org

individual practice can alter existing and produce new spatial conditions, be they of urban, architectural, or 1:1 scale.

In »the Production of Space« Lefebvre argues that »a Spatial Practice refers to the production and reproduction of spatial relations between objects and products. It also ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion. In terms of social space, and of each member of a given society's relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance.« Lefebvre seems to suggest that to engage with space in a critical mode is a matter of competence and performance. Do you agree?

Absolutely! Competence not in the sense of being authorized to do so, but in the sense of being sensitized and being able to understand the forces and variables that have an effect on the production of space. Not every problem favours a physical solution. There is the legendary quote by Cedric Price that he was once having a client-conversation with a couple, who approached him to build a house for them. His response was that what they really needed was a divorce.

Verschlagwortet mit Architektur einmischen Kollaboration Partizipation Verantwortung

Markus Miessen is an architect, consultant and writer. The initiator of the Participation quadrilogy, his work revolves around questions of critical spatial practice, institution building, and spatial politics. His practice, Studio Miessen, is currently working on projects for an with Bergen Assembly, Performa Biennial, Witte de With, Kosovo National Gallery, Weltkulturen Museum, and the artist Hito Steyerl. Their largest project to date is a strategic framework and new Kunsthalle building for a former NATO military site in Germany. In 2008, Miessen founded the Winter School Middle East. He is currently a professor for Critical

Spatial Practice at the Städelschule, Frankfurt, and guest professor at HEAD

Geneva as well as USC Los Angeles.

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