

An enemy of architecture.

1.

This presentation is centred on a site-specific sketch for a larger project for Metropolis Festival 2015.

It presents an idea and method for engaging artistically with vague terrains, junk spaces and SLOAPs – spaces left over after planning. The presentation will focus on the potentially radical openness found in overlooked or “void” space in the urban structure, and how these temporary gaps in the city can act as a counterpoint to the hegemony of planning, seen in relation to their spatial, temporal and metaphysical properties.

The formal approach of the work is a site-specific intervention and installation. The sketch that we are seeing here is just one suggestion for how this work can be conducted, there are several other possibilities, utilizing text, performance and video – but what they have in common is that they are based on site-research, ephemeral interventions and a dialogue between a specific site and a visual representation of the site.

The area that we are standing in was investigated on various levels, and from this investigation I subtracted a certain amount of photographs, these were then processed as xerox collages, which have been reinstalled in the area – as a temporary psychotopographic map of the site – an ephemeral and nomadic image re-contextualizing an unstable area of the city.

A visual de- and recoding of a vague terrain, which has been dissolved and coagulated, to an uncertain end. It seems to me that work based in these types of non-sites, off-sites and urban blind-fields, must be defined through a practice of process, ambiguity and dead ends.

2.

But what is it, this space? This Terrain Vague. The term itself has been stretched to hold many things – usually places like a vacant lot, post industrial wasteland, barren and unused space in and around the city.

An invisible or liminal space, a threshold. The term, which etymologically relates to the words land, or territory as well as vacant, vagrant, vague or wave (as in the sea, or fluctuation) – covers something relatively undefinable, and ultimately it is the very indefinability of these types of spaces that sets them off from the rest of our urban fixtures, indeterminability in identity as in organization. In some cases the term has been used to describe a border zone at the edge of the city, a transitory space between the urban and the rural. A site for the setting of debris, refuse, carnivals, circuses and other nomadic travellers. With the contemporary urban sprawl and city development, such a clear border could hardly be said to exist today, rather the vague terrain has been integrated into the fabric of the city, as ambiguously open and closed zones of seemingly vacant, discarded, forgotten or unusable space.

Space internal to the city, yet external to its everyday life.

3.

The general discourse concerning the vague terrain is usually polarized into two points. The first decries the disorder they represent in the city. It perceives the vacant indeterminate zones that punctuate the urban landscape as representations of unacceptable socio-economic deterioration and abandonment. The vague terrain runs contrary to the desired image of the functional and prosperous city. It presents a problem. For those who hold the second view the vague terrain offers a counterpoint to the way order and consumption holds sway over the city. It offers room for spontaneous creative appropriation and informal use that would otherwise have trouble finding a place in the public spaces subjected increasingly to the demands of commerce. The vague terrain is here an ideal place for a certain kind of resistance to emerge, and perhaps even an example of such a resistance, it presents a different way of experiencing the city. These two antagonistic views are limited, each in its own way, by a degree of idealism. The vague terrain may well symbolize economic stagnation, that does not correspond with the ideal of a functional city, but this is reductionist at best. It may also be seen as a territory of emancipation, but only with the risk of wallowing in a romantic vision with a certain disconnection to reality.

But if we attempt to view the vague terrain as material, as a form of discourse, as both a geography, substance, image and process. we may go beyond both of these views and into a field of a more multilayered perception of these kinds of spaces. One where we can possibly expand our existing vocabulary towards another kind of urban discourse. A more divers understanding of these spaces and their connotations.

4.

The social, symbolic and formal qualities of these spaces are in opposition to the stringent order of planning ruling the city around them. They are zones of temporary “un-planning” existing within the planned, and vice versa.

Like other zones, they have a perimeter and a geography, a place in space and time, but they are imbued with qualities that warps all of this.

Like The Zone of the Strugatsky brothers sci-fi novel, *Roadside Picnic* (1971), on which Tarkovsky's *Stalker* was based, these zones in the city has something alien about them, something that is a sum of their material and topographic properties, but which also goes beyond this -something placed between the real and imaginary, something mythical. The zone can not be understood from the outside, from its mere physical properties, but it is also not completely understood from inside, from its processual properties. It is part of a surrounding system, yet also torn lose from this at several levels. There is most often a threshold, a perimeter, a barrier you have to cross, almost as a right of passage. After that you are lost, off the map. No longer walking in accordance to the rhythm of the known and functional signs of the city. The city that the zone makes real or realer, just as the city makes the zone feel uncanny. The

zones are not just “in” time and space. Rather they “time” and they “space”. They produce a special kind time and space, inside and outside of them, like a porous membrane.

They are clearly and indisputably there, at hand, but always in-determinable, imprecise, uncertain. Despite the fact that these geographies are often sealed off from view and entry, they are somehow without the normal limits of the functional geographies of the city we live through. They have in them a temporal stagnation and mobility, a conflation of past, present and future, they are palimpsest space - a synthesis of liberated time. Spaces of promise and expectation.

5.

From the formal neglect and collapse of these spaces, new meanings of objects can arise. No other place in the city – except for perhaps the building site, are provisional overgrowths, stackings, hoardings, leanings and pilings of materials and objects accepted. They are the formal and physical equivalent of a psychological repression or displacement – littered with layers of micro-processes, forming an anthropocene strata. Garbage, surplus material, personal artefacts, and collective debris clutter these kind of grounds, and are absorbed into their ecosystems. When looking at these collections of objects and artefacts through a para-archaeological scope, they become reminders of a city constructed over time, of time, but constructions taking place elsewhere. A city produced as much by actual materials as by their absence - as memories and remnants. An instantaneous process of sedimentation in the actual and mental city. Everything that happens here does so on uncertain grounds, as authorship, organisation and purpose are usually impossible to pin down. These are spaces where meaning has been temporarily dispensed or dispersed, but also spaces where meaning is constantly in the making, however latent and staggering. In this openness of time, form and possibilities, they are areas steeped in utopian qualities. Yet they are there, now, before us and not in that unobtainable “other place”. But perhaps part of them are.

6.

These types of sites are characterized by a temporary loss of place. An interrupted process of the legitimized place-making of planners and governments. A space which can either be temporarily ignored, semi-used, or obstructed so as to limit its use as much as possible. But also a space which, as much as it is anchored in a localized history and geography, holds a set of global similarities, a vocabulary of materials and codes of neglectedness – which turns it into a non-place. But unlike the non-places that Marc Auge describes, like airport terminals, banks and hotels, which are removed from a place experience due to their total order, then it is the disorder and disarray of these spaces that link them together, as sites plunged out of the category of understandable places and into a metaphorical omnipresent interzone. A space of inbetweeness, of time, as a form of transitory blank points on the map, and in the mind.

The loss of place always creates a certain uneasiness. In a general sense space is a point of departure for generating place, and place is a point of departure for generating meaning. Place experience is

ultimately the foundation of our tangible understanding of the material world. A place to put things, places into which we situate our selves. Places are perhaps the very fix points of the self. When we lose these fixtures, we are left with a state of crisis. A fundamental crisis of time and space, embedded in each other and normally managed (or enhanced) through an ideology of effectiveness, growth and the progress of progress - a fixing and enclosure or space within order and rationality.

The vague terrain is a blind field, of perhaps strategic invisibility, to this ideology. in the urban economic and political field they can both be view as strong and weak points, in being target for, submitted to and resisting capitalization. They are open to, or effects of, economic speculation or downturn, they exist as the margins of the system of urban planning, constantly reappearing as stubbornly unincorporable elements. Places left outside the city's effective circuits and productive structures. They are interior islands, mentally exterior in the physical city. Both inside and outside of the urban dynamic. Un-inhabited, un-safe, unproductive.

7.

In this they appear as a negative image, as much in a sense of criticism as in that of a possibly subversive alternative to the algorithmitized and planned city. These are spaces capable of *estrangement*, not only in the sense of alienation but in their capacity to *create* what might be called surreal effects, which work in excess of an 'otherness' to rationality. This is a process that combines interruption with production, the interruption of the modern matrix with the tactical elaboration of imaginative mobility.

In our position, as ambiguously internal and external to the urban system, to power, to activity, to architecture, these spaces constitute at one and the same time a physical expression of our fear and insecurity, and yet also expectancy of the other – the alternative, the utopian, the future.

As a container for the unknown and uncertain, they hold a promise and potential as temporary autonomous zones, despite the fact that this is something made illusory by economic and governmental powers.

But temporarily, these spaces can act as mental signifiers for utopian and autonomous desires.

As wormholes or devices for teleportation to a momentary outside of the paradigm of planning and order. A space where new maps for the vagaries of utopian thought can be drawn.

8.

But we can not go about doing this using any old cartographic technique. As much as these spaces are embedded within the geography of the known, they are Terra Incognita.

The map is a political abstract grid, a gigantic con enforced by the carrot-and-stick conditioning of the “expert” state, until for most of us the map becomes the territory. And yet, because the map is an abstraction it cannot cover earth with 1:1 accuracy. Within the fractal complexities of actual geographies the map can see only dimensional grids. Hidden enfolded immensities escape the measuring rod. The map is not accurate, the map is closed. But the illusory, or illusive, autonomous zone is open. Metaphorically it unfolds within fractal dimensions invisible to the cartography of control. To understand these spaces, we have to introduce the concept of psychotopology and psychotopography, as an alternative to the states surveying and mapmaking. Psychotopography draws 1:1 maps of reality, in a faulty, haphazard and makeshift way. Just the way that we perceive and remember. The psychotopographic map is inherently subjective, but a 1:1 map cannot “control” its territory. It can only be used to *suggest*, in a sense *gesture* towards, certain features.

9.

The insecure, immeasurable, and nonfunctional turns into certain mental geometries, conditions and connotations. The perforation of the urban fabric becomes a cognitive imprint. The absence of apparent order and organisation of these places come to embody both our common fears and anxieties as well as our expectancies and desires for something new, a potential about to take form. This age of increasing acceleration, in technology, media, science, economy, globalisation, customs and realities inevitably produces a situation of permanent estrangement between the subject and the world. An epoch of strangeness before the world. With its dual capacity as place and non-place, problem and possibility, and through its halted and altered temporality, the vague terrains become territorial indications of this strangeness itself. Or anti-monuments to its conditioning. If we should attempt to perceive the blinding presence of the city as that which is conscious, on a collective level, then these areas, existing always on the fringe, even when geographically centred, are gateways, or power-spots (to use an occultist term) to an urban subconscious. A commonly shared anguish and longing. As a blind-field with a potential as dialectical image. They are a potential dent or rift in the veneer of urban reason, exposing a multilayered and mythical chaos below.

So as much as the vague terrain can be seen as a blight on, or wound in the urban body, it can also be a refuge, when that same urban body offers us a crushing homogeneity, an anguished aggression of technological reason, of telematic universalism, cybernetic totalitarianism, freedom under control. The enthusiasm that these vacant, expectant, imprecise, fluctuating spaces can evoke, is a response to our strangeness before the world, before our city, before our selves.

10.

As much as the vacant and undefined space carries a feeling of uncanniness, and anxiety, the presence of architecture, or even the image of architecture, can transport a feeling of safety. It signifies an order of things, and the complexity of the architectural endeavour assures us that there is a Plan, a promise of a tomorrow, a future. In a sense architecture itself, is always about the future. When the architect comes with a proposition, they always imagine that it will be taking place in an -imagined- future. Assuming that this future will be better – partly due to this creation. Architecture is essentially utopian. But the problem with the future promised through the image of architecture, is that it is fixed, stabilized, articulated. The promise of the empty space calls us to be participants in the utopia, to dream ourselves,

individually, of what the future might be. The image of architecture makes us consumers of the utopian idea of someone else. In our late-modern cities dominated by the axiomatic power of capitalism and the state, there are certain conditions and agendas inseparable from architecture.

Even when architecture resists an explicit political agenda – if this is ever possible – it is driven by idealist/ formalist agendas. Based on Spurious, statistical data models and facilitated by the shape making potential of new computer based design tools. All of this funded by speculative finance, and predicated by consumerism and the rather dubious concept of the free market.

Contemporary culture has put its faith in an ideology of progress. Progress will make things better! As well as making things faster and smaller, or bigger, depending on the value system. The future is driven forth by our faith in the drive. But what happens when this faith fails to ring true in the light of economic downturn, ecological catastrophes, rising fear of terrorism, crime and global pandemics? When the bright shiny future can no longer be guaranteed, we will perhaps be faced with a longing for the open, for the unknown, for the possible or impossible. A nostalgia for the future. Even though futurism would seem like a rather peculiar ambition today- if there is one thing we know, it is that the world as we know it is not going to last.

11.

But as much as architecture can be regarded as a utopian endeavour as it suggests future solutions to current problems, or alternate futures altogether, it also poses a problem, as the destiny of architecture is always one of colonization. Of the imposing of limits, order and form. When entering the estranged space of the vague terrain, it will always desire to introduce these elements, to make it recognizable, identical, functional and efficient. At its very core, architecture is an instrument of organization, of rationalization, of producing efficiency. A desire for turning the uncivilized into the cultivated, the fallow into the productive, the void into the built. In this way, when architecture and urban design project these desires into a vacant space, it seems that they are incapable of doing anything other than introducing radical transformations, attempting to turn estrangement into citizenship, and striving at all costs to dissolve away the magic of the obsolete in the realism of efficiency. The question is if architecture can in any way engage the vague terrain without becoming an aggressive instrument of power and abstract reason?

If the two can not coexist, then the question also seems to arise whether the Terrain Vague can then be considered an altogether opposition, an enemy of architecture?

12.

The changing nature of our cities are also changing the way we have to regard the vague terrain, and where we have to look for it. It seems to me that we must expand its potential form and meanings. And not jump to any such simplified conclusions as that the temporary and the functional cannot coexist, and that the potential of the vague terrain is either phantasmic romanticism, or a disruptive problem in the urban discourse.

It seems to me that we must, as is the case, continue to highlight still more aspects of the potential of these kinds of spaces, and continuously reintroduce them into the discourse of art, architecture, urban planning and academic studies.

I do not just wish to see these areas left unplanned or undisturbed, but rather I want to explore their ever changing potential and problems, in relation to seeing the vague terrain as something that is not just a physically urban phenomenon, but a field of studies, a mode of work, a vague practise. A practise that does not limit itself to an engagement urban collapse, but one which can be introduced into all manner of unstable spaces. A practice of vague spaces that can be made mobile, dialectic, with the potential to be introduced into other systems, such as the institution, the archive, data-networks of all kinds.

The search for or production of the vague terrain in these other types of spaces, is the act of dowsing for potential temporary autonomous zones. The search for space where we can reconsider how we engage with our selves, each other and the city. In the face of relentless modernisation, fixed in a nexus between state and capital, Vagueness, Vague Practises and Vague Spaces, are targeted by hegemonic power through a process of fixing and enclosure of space, meaning and practice. But the vague and strange continues to perforate the late-modern city of order, control and rationalisation. Thus I see a possibility in strangeness and vagueness, and the practices associated with them, as artistic and political activities that runs counter to the power of hegemony, opening up possibilities for other forms of space and practice.

To me the tactics, method and idea of working with vague space is ultimately about choosing to see the margins of things, as a space with a radical potential for openness. One where the anchorage for our understanding of object, architecture and history is potentially shattered, and new explorations in perspective and meanings become possible.