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Unfeasibility as an Ideal

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If we accept as true that some projects in the public domain seek a role for art which could be characterised as utopian, then unfeasibility certainly forms one of their essential components. I am not referring to the often quite well-meaning but naive interventions where a sculpture tries to adapt to the requirements of its surroundings, or where the artist transforms himself into a designer. These, too, are works which want to escape the claustrophobia of the institution of art, but they represent only a limited excursion. The violation only begins to assume serious forms when the artist places nothing less than an entire city in the balance, or wants to alter the world itself. It is the nineteenth century dream of the gesamtkunstwerk which here continues to haunt art: the powerlessness and isolation of art compensated for by its metaphysical payload together produced the dream of an all-encompassing work, a work of art to end all art. Here, urban development and architecture often constitute the first step of the journey toward the total. It is remarkable how many artists try to plan utopia with the aid of architectural plans, whereby the artist literally takes it upon himself to build a new world. An advantage of such an undertaking is that it frees the artist from the stigmas of Art; as a work of art the undertaking transcends itself and steps onto the stage of reality. But in so doing, it in fact creates the conditions of its own unfeasibility.

For the Russian constructivists, the move to architecture was a logical step. Tatlins *Monument for the Third International* of 1919-1920 featuring a cube, sphere and cylinder revolving at a variety of speeds, imprisoned within the spiral of progress, was intended to form nothing less than a governmental facility for the new age. A model of the monument was carried triumphantly through the streets of Moscow, but the building itself was never realised: its scale was to great – even for a regime whose policy was to use colossal architecture as proof of its success. But scale was probably not the only reason for the project not being carried out. The imagery of a society in constant motion, spiralling toward an unknown future, goes too far for most leaders, and in the Soviet Union, as well, one ultimately opted to consolidate true existing socialism by means of massive, neoclassicistic forms, ones capable of representing Utopia in an already solidified state.

At odds with reality

The realisation that Utopia could not be built under the existing conditions characterises the plans of the generations following Tatlin. The dreamed architecture designed by artists in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, takes as its premise a new society which is by definition at odds with present reality. In this way, unfeasibility became an intrinsic aspect of their plans. The unitary urbanism of the international situationists and Constant's plans for *New Babylon*, which had their origins in that movement, attest to this. Unitary urbanism was directed toward creating a new environment for man in accordance with the most progressive thought from every field of endeavour. In this way it showed itself to be yet another project with the ambition of transcending every individual form of art. A new form of life in new surroundings: nothing less is involved here. And, since this new form of life can only come about following a number of dramatic changes, the execution of this greatest of

projects, the transformation of an entire city into a public domain must, by definition, remain a dream. Even the situationists themselves considered it, for the time being, nothing more than a programme and a series of isolated experiments, while they waited for the great day to dawn. Constant intended his scale models for *New Babylon* to be viewed in the light of the prevailing situation of impossibility. The enormous structures, located in radiating zones, each offering a different atmosphere to the nomadic user, and which ultimately were to form a great net over the existing landscape, transecting the old cities, show, according to Constant, how the world potentially could be. These plans are thus only unfeasible because the existing reality prevents the realisation of this creative potential. Constant: "(…) the creativity of the present day [can] only manifest itself as a breach in, a conflict with the reality of the present day." I.e., the plan's unfeasibility is used here as proof of society's stagnation. The very fact of its unfeasibility serves as the basis for the project's most significant statement.

This negative dynamism explains why so many of the projects of the last 100 years were so ambitious and far-reaching as to critically test any belief in the possibility of their execution. However, at the same time, they do not stop with the fact of their minimal chances of coming to life; although unfeasibility is typically an all-too-obvious aspect of artists' large-scale plans, they tend to be worked out in great detail, as though their execution were imminent. The artist concretises the unfeasibility because the field of reality does not particularly define the context of his playing field. He keeps believing in a happy ending, even if everyone consigns his project to the domain of fairy tales: his dream shall become reality – someday.

View of the future

In the course of the 1970s, the model of the negative dialectic increasingly came under pressure. Unfeasibility lost it validity. Increasingly often, artists searched for an immediate realisation of the future society in the form of political engagement, or they withdrew into the isolation of the desert, where the dream could be realised in large format, but where the utopia dissolved into a mirage. As American artist Peter Fend observes, at that point in time, the path of architecture was off limits to art. Plans by such artists as Robert Smithson and Walter De Maria are regarded exclusively as works of art, as interesting but unusable conceptions suitable as footnotes in the development of art.

However, the path to architecture appears to have been rediscovered in the past few years. By steering clear of the all-too-utopian, and giving priority to realism and realisability, artists are succeeding in realising projects which are in harmony with present-day society. As part of a general tendency to opt for microstrategies rather than structural change, they enter into collaboration with urban planners, architects, administrators and users in such a way that their feasibility is translated into the cement jargon of power, thus exchanging the fantasy of supremacy for the daydream of limited success. But, as realistic and manageable as this method is, the absence of the dreamt impossibility in a sense obscures our view of the future. After all, it is a peculiar characteristic of unfeasible and overly ambitious projects that they possess the capacity to show us the world in a form we never previously thought possible – not because the plans will themselves be ultimately realised, but because they can be regarded as studies toward a future society, as models which ultimately will be able to be applied. However, these future-visions would seem primarily to be developed without the intervention of the artist, and in a manner which turns dreams into nightmares. This becomes visible when we look at a project Allan Kaprow presented in the seventies, in which a worldwide network of TV arcades would be set up: places where it would be possible both to broadcast and receive, where everyone would participate in everything, with all activities being viewable everywhere. I.e.: the dream of a completely interactive public domain, so typical of the art of that time. This utopia has now become a reality, but in its atopian, or perhaps even dystopian, form: the internet constitutes the large-scale execution of this dream, with publicness being exchanged for just accessibility; everything is shared by everyone, but each individual acts in the isolation of his particular fascinations. What remains of publicness on the internet is experienced as its greatest problem: the user is bombarded with advertisements for privacy protectors and *internet washers*, which conceal every trace of use from the eyes of others.

Reality catches up with and overtakes unrealised projects in a manner hidden like a shadow behind their shining optimism. 'Experience architecture' has largely replaced the grey housing estates of modernism, but, through just this, the hope of the situationists is definitively destroyed. Amusement parks and shopping malls line up like the chain of structures which Constant designed, but the liberation which should be there is imprisoned by the chains of consumption. The rude awakening from a dream which turns out to be reality may come to pass sooner than one might think. When Giny Vos designed *Castle for Mike* in 1995, she transformed Manhattan into a fairy-tale fortress, an expropriation of European history in a truly American manner. Present-day Manhattan has changed into a bulwark, but the illuminated walls from the dream have been replaced by unseen surveillance mechanisms and dubious control methods stemming from an hysterical attempt to keep out the rest of the world. Recently, Hans van Houwelingen proposed to transform the KPN tower in Drentepark in the Zuidas into an Amsterdam version of the Eiffel Tower. If the government really took art seriously, he found, someone should be given the opportunity to build something really big. In so doing, he in a sense was following in the footsteps of Constant: Van Houwelingen's proposal also seems primarily intended as a unmasking of society's impotence. The tower he dreamed of is certain never to be built. Nevertheless, it is important that we examine his design carefully, as somewhere in its shadow, a monster lurks with which Amsterdam will be adorning itself within the not-too-distant future.

Literature

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