

## **Urban Occupation: ACTION 2009**

### **First Action: May Day 09 - Studio Critique**

Please carefully read the following points, which offer both general and individual critique and advice toward the further development of your actions. With respect to your projects, it is not a question of doing the right thing, but of understanding what you have achieved and how it might be developed in future projects. Consider carefully how to best reflect upon your project and then, within your assigned groups, discuss how individual projects can be developed further to a larger team project, or how successful aspects of each action already undertaken might inform your next action as a team. Use the experience gained from the first action, and recognise that the second action is not a repetition, but a development of your ideas now framed through collaboration.

**WE ARE NOT SUGGESTING YOU DO THE SAME ACTION AGAIN! TEAM WORK IS NOT SIMPLY DOING ALL OF THE INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS AGAIN TOGETHER, BUT DEVELOPING A NEW PROJECT TOGETHER, BASED ON YOUR TESTINGS AND EXPERIENCE OF THE INSTANT OCCUPATION.**

How do you gather an audience that constitutes a public? You might even consider inviting friends and family to participate, or you might think of ways to advertise your group actions before they take place. Use email distribution lists, use posters, pamphlets, even postcards, or megaphones to announce your action.

Remember that an action can also take place in your absence, and you can document it from a distance, for example, with hidden cameras and other recording devices. Actions often need to be prepared in the evening, or days before they take place.

The composition, material and graphics used in your actions needs to be developed further. Remember that you are all designers, so use the skills you have to make the props, posters, etc, associated with your action more convincing. This will require more thought with respect to the materials and ready-made props you use.

Be more intense, and be more bold in your actions. Whatever you plan to do, push it a bit further until it is really hard work for you, and until it becomes something that you can be proud of. For example, produce 300 multiples of one thing, which might mean a day of folding paper airplanes, or 5 hours of performance not just 10 minutes, or conversations with passers-by that take longer than 2 to 5 minutes, but 20 minutes or one hour, or else, repeat your action over a number of days.

If an object is to be engaged with, for example, paper airplanes, perhaps the designer/actor needs to fold 100, 200, even 300 paper airplanes. Then, these airplanes could be distributed over three days, so that every morning another cluster of paper airplanes appears, which subsequently disappear or are destroyed through use over the day. (But we are not suggesting here that paper airplanes are the answer!)

Be more focused: for example, maybe your action uses less (props, ideas, materials) instead of more, so that rather than creating a picnic with cookies and a poster, you just focus on giving away cookies and thereby lure the public into a conversation with you

Be more open with your expectations. Maybe your action is just a starting point and then you have to follow the response of your public, and expect the unexpected, and go with it. You cannot over-determine your actions, but must instead allow for chance or contingencies.

The key design issues that arose and remained underdeveloped in nearly all the projects included issues of scale, procedure, materials, tools and props, and composition.

### Critique of Individual Actions:

#### Mesi:

Mesi created a 'Capitalist Picnic' as an ironic gesture to draw attention to the highly political history of Rosa Luxemburg Platz. What was needed in this action was a more convincing picnic blanket, or multiple picnic blankets inviting a number of zones of intimacy or microcosms of the political to be laid out. These then could have created a greater impact at the scale of the urban, by multiplying the impetuous gesture of a picnic. Or else, Mesi might have focussed on her cookies, even made home-baked cookies and cakes. She could have offered her 'Capitalist biscuits' in order to create a non-verbal contract with the public, or a gift that requires a return, so that participants respond by listening to the history of Rosa Luxemburg Platz. Mesi could have further developed her poster(s) in response to the context, and worked more thoughtfully on her graphics. She might have even parodied the election poster board that is currently located on site.

#### Caitlyn:

Caitlyn placed herself in the public sphere as a puppet who could be activated by passers-by walking over 'hot-spots' which she marked onto the pavement and street in coloured chalk. Caitlyn really needed a larger and a more convincing and durable poster offering the passer-by instructions on her puppetry of the everyday. She might also have created a little stage, or soap box for herself, by this small gesture she would have marked herself out as street performer and further drawn attention to her action. Caitlyn's ambition in part offered a commentary on power relations achieved at a distance, and the causal links that distribute affects across the socius. See the controversial Milgram experiment of the early 1960's where a psychologist, Stanley Milgram, tested the willingness of participants to follow the orders of a perceived authority figure despite these orders contradicting their personal conscience.

#### Antoine:

Antoine wanted to draw attention to the political history of Rosa Luxemburg Platz, and to specifically draw attention to the history of Rosa Luxemburg herself. At the same time he was commenting on how sites of trauma, or violence, become tourist spectacles, and how the disturbing histories of a place can become occluded or hidden beneath tourist consumption. He invited people to creatively participate via montage in the creation of an anti-memorial or an ephemeral memorial in front of which they could have their photos taken with the proviso that these images would be sent to the participants via email. The poster needs to be more graphically convincing and also larger in scale. Also, the invitation to create montages that represented multiple images of Rosa Luxemburg through a parody of soft-porn images could have been framed with more care. For instance, a table might have been set up where participants could gather to make their montage, which they would then adhere to the impermanent memorial, before which they would then have their photo taken. Antoine could also have dressed himself up as a city guide to lend authenticity to the project. Such developments might have helped Antoine draw attention to the action and facilitated further participation, though it should be noted that he did succeed in getting a few passers-by to collaborate on the creation of his Rosa memorial.

#### Catalin:

Catalin seems interested in unconventional mobility through and in public space, and requisitioned a number of shopping trolleys or caddies for his mobility action. Shopping trolleys were decontextualised, and by placing them outside the context of the supermarket they also came to be associated with the image of the nomadic homeless, who use the shopping trolley to move their belongings from place to place, or to collect discarded bottles for refund. Catalin opens an invitation to the public to take the shopping trolley for a stroll, but the invitation was not

made very clear, it needed to be signposted. Probably more than 3 shopping trolleys were required for this action. A stand could have been created where the trolleys were parked. Passers-by could then be invited to take a trolley and attempt to collect things from Rosa Luxemburg place, things that have fallen out of use, or fallen out of the network of Capitalist exchange. The shopping trolley offers the possibility of mobility and collection. Perhaps Catalin could also have approached a supermarket chain to see whether they would participate in the action by lending him trolleys? Think about how could existing infrastructure can be further taken advantage of? (See NL Architects, Netherlands, who recently created an urban project called, 'mobile forest' using shopping trolleys, 2008. <http://www.dezeen.com/2008/11/30/moving-forest-by-nl-architects/>).

Laure:

Laure's conceptually strong project was prepared in advance. She gathered earth from the backyards of the residential neighbours of Volksbühne in order to invite them to grow a plant in a little pot on their window sill for a week (presumably upon a window sill that could be seen from Rosa Luxemburg Platz). The participants were to be asked to sign a legally non-binding contract stating that they would care for the plant, and at the end of the week send an image of the plant to Laure via email. The idea of negotiating a relationship of care and responsibility for life (the plant) suggests a potentially profound relationship. The challenge here was achieving participation, as no one appeared to want to get involved. Perhaps Laure needed to offer small plants that already showed more promise of life, or were somehow aesthetically pleasing. Or else, perhaps she needed another mode of approach, one that was less confrontational (Laure was ringing on doorbells trying to get people engaged). For example, Laure might have set up a small plant stall near the door of a building adjacent to the Volksbühne, which would then allow passers-by, as well as residents to pause over her offering and consider whether they would participate.

Chris:

The potential poetics of the folded paper plane are reminiscent of the action of Sadako Sasaki, a victim of Hiroshima, who folded a 1000 paper cranes before succumbing to Leukimia as a result of her exposure to radiation. Here folded paper cranes offer a representation of peace. In contrast, the paper plane as projectile is potentially aggressive, but it is also very playful. The problem with Chris's action was how to invite participation less aggressively. Rather than throw paper planes at passers-by and hope they return the gesture, perhaps Chris needed to be absent from the scene, but offer up a large number of paper planes that people could retrieve and send into flight. Chris might also have engaged more thoughtfully with the question of scale: more paper planes, clustered at a chosen site, and offered up consecutively over a series of days. The paper plane could be a simple found object that people happen upon by chance, this might animate them to use it. Also, larger or more special paper planes might have been folded.

Ryan:

Ryan's being-a-spy in urban space was a little bit juvenile, even if potentially comic. He dressed as his interpretation of a spy, then sat next to members of the public and pretended to enter into dialogue with them in order to hand over his briefcase, presumably full of top-secret files. Perhaps he should have dressed up as a big cuddly Berlin bear instead and simply struck up conversations with passers-by? But what can be salvaged from his experiment? Perhaps what Ryan needed to be was an architecture student enquiring into public space. What he might have done is wear a T-Shirt that said: I am an architecture student from TU Berlin, and I am interested in your opinion about Public Space. Then he could have approached people on Rosa Luxemburg Platz and asked whether they would participate in very brief questionnaire about what they believe best constitutes a public space.

Caitlin:

Caitlin was working with the affective and associative qualities of public space, and a potential synaesthesia of the senses in the public sphere, that is, a mixing of the senses. She wanted to explore the idea of sunbathing as performance in a public place in a landlocked city and superimpose this with the improbable sounds of the sea nearby (visit Janet Cardiff's sound installation on at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum). From what began as a culturally biased idea concerning how people behave in public spaces based on the Australian idea of the beach being the reserve where sunbathing occurs, together with an observation of the behaviour of the public in a different context, Berlin, Caitlin brought her different cultural expectations into operation to create a sonic juxtaposition. She effectively de-contextualised the simple pleasure of sunbathing, then re-contextualised it again through sound. Caitlin might experiment further with the effects of sound in urban spaces: what if several sound sources had been set up that subtly disrupted expectations? She might also have considered using sound to offer a history of Rosa Luxemburg, and Rosa Luxemburg Platz, for instance, with a voice emerging out of the foliage. It's good that she readjusted her action based on recognising what appeared to be its early limitations, though she might have pursued her performance of sunbaking for a longer duration to really test whether it might have worked.

Niklas

Niklas presented us with a history of Berlin, and of the naming of Rosa Luxemburg Platz itself, through the placement of the two figures of Horst Wessel (a Nationalist Socialist 'martyr' after whom the Platz was named between 1933-1945) and Karl Leibknecht (a German Communist after whom the Platz was named between 1945-1947). Niklas set up two life-sized mannequins of the above historical figures (or slightly larger than life size) in order to invite passers-by to attack the mannequins with a selection of weapons he made available. The participant was invited to attack the cardboard mannequin they believed to be 'evil', raising the difficult ethical issue of how we punish those we believe have committed a crime against humanity. How do we respond to what Hannah Arendt has called the 'banality of evil'? Or else, how and why do we ascribe evil to one political party or another at different historical moments? There is also foregrounded in this game the very real risk of punishing the innocent. Niklas might have further exaggerated the 'fairground' or 'theme park' aspect of the 'game' being played by presenting the weapons more explicitly, and creating a poster or board that offered instructions. Perhaps those successful in knocking down the 'evil', or else, any of the figures set up, would receive a small gift. The figures of the two mannequins were of a good scale in relation to the Platz and the idea was conceptually strong. Another possible development might have been to add further historical figures, for instance, Niklas might have included Rosa Luxemburg herself, after whom the Platz is currently named.

Shaun

Shaun used a culture jamming technique to 'détourné' existing infrastructure. He requisitioned the street furniture of a sign post and covered it over so as to communicate a different message. Rather than instructing the passer-by with a direction, the street sign asked a question: What does 1<sup>st</sup> May, Labour day, mean for us today? He then distributed chalk in the vicinity so that passers-by could write their response on the streets and walls. Shaun needed to work more convincingly with the graphic of the sign, and perhaps 'rig' the signpost more inventively with containers offering free chalk. How could he have further opened the invitation to participate? Perhaps he should have transformed a few more street signs, and other signs in the area to create a greater effect, again this is a question of thinking about a project in terms of scale and impact.

Elba:

Elba wanted to draw attention to the minutiae of the urban sphere, downpipes, small details, the almost invisible infrastructure that makes our lives possible. It seemed a little unclear, but Elba was apparently drawing attention to waste disposal in particular. She could have framed this more explicitly. The exclamation 'Ich bin Satt', which was painted near a downwater pipe, could be multiplied across the Platz. Another technique that might have been used for speed and

effectiveness is the paste-up technique. You photocopy images and/or text onto inexpensive paper, cut out the image/text and glue it up with a simple glue made of flour and water: this technique also means that interventions will wear off a façade over time. Also, perhaps Elba's speech bubble should have really addressed the passer-by accusing her/him: you've filled me up with your waste! Or different speech bubbles might have reacted to different situations with different, context specific comments. So the tool or technique could remain the same and the tone of the message could also remain the same, with its social critique and political, and environmental agenda, but distributed speech bubbles could react to the various conditions and situations. In this action the speech bubble was powerful enough, and Elba did not need to anthropomorphise the downpipe by 'dressing' it up with glasses and a face.

Jacob and Ivan:

Jacob and Ivan's first mistake was that they did not follow instructions: everyone was meant to undertake their own action. This of course meant you could at the same time join forces to get help from each other, but the action itself was under individual authorship. This is because the final action will be undertaken in groups. Jacob and Alex's action was the first we attempted to visit, and the idea of locating it behind the façade of a neighbouring apartment building was promising. The site was a shared garden courtyard, a space that operates between publicity and privacy. We were instructed to look out for posters that would in fact direct us to this zone, as well as to offer us further directions, but we found no such thing. Where were the posters, and where was Jacob and Ivan? Was the subversive idea being enacted that nothing was meant to be here, but instead we were provoked to take a stroll around an urban interior? These two actors needed to be more present, and to offer an explanation of the action so that we could have discussed their work. We can wait for the documentation that is presumably to come?

Michael:

Michael was making a comment on the façade as a surface of negotiation between the private and the public spheres. The façade is the surface of all kinds of regulations and disagreements. In particular Michael was drawing attention to traces on neighbouring facades where attempts had been made to erase graffiti, but where a patch of different coloured paint, or else the graffiti message itself were still visible. To draw attention to these traces Michael 'framed' these patches of wall with polystyrene frames. Michael really needed to prepare this action the night before, so that the frames could be discovered in the morning, and then he might have documented the discovery of the frames by passers-by or neighbours. He might also have reconsidered his tools and materials. Perhaps a paste-up method would have worked for him too, and then he could have created a set of different 'paper' frames that could be easily and quickly applied to urban surfaces. Or else he could have sourced real frames, either second hand, cheap or discarded frames. Drawing attention to the controversial issue of graffiti and the façade as a zone of constant negotiation were both promising ideas.