ON 'FIGHT-SPECIFIC' SPACES

Mariette Schiltz
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feat Bert Theis

The ongoing Isola Art Center project began as the Isola Art Project in 2001 when curators and artists Bert Theis, Mariette Schiltz, Stefano Boccalini, Gruppo A12, Roberto Pinto, Marco Scotini and others started to collaborate in utilizing public spaces in the former industrial district called Isola in Milan. An expanded incarnation of this group became the *Isola dell'Arte* (Island of Art) in 2003, which started occupying the second floor of a former factory, the "Stecca degli artigiani" and hosted a series of one day events campaigning to save the building and the two nearby parks from demolition, transforming them into a Centre for Art and the Community.

From 2005 the Isola dell'Arte was joined by a new generation of artists, activists, and philosophers, becoming the Isola Art Center and out - Office for urban transformation, founded by Bert Theis. It continued operating from the second floor of the *Stecca*, an ex-industrial warehouse which the art center shared with cultural associations and craftsmen, until the space was destroyed in 2007 to make way for 'Porta Nuova', a controversial building development that transformed the neighborhood into a building site devoid of green spaces and play areas. The two flagship buildings, called the *Bosco Verticale* (Vertical Forest), designed by Stefano Boeri, architect and at that time Councilor for Culture, Fashion and Design for the Council of Milan, are Boeri's solution to the lack of green space in the *Isola* ('Island') area of Milan pointing to a fundamental gap between the mentality of the developers and the needs of the area's inhabitants. The two luxury residential towers that host tree plantations on large balconies on each of its levels present a 'green space' in a novel format - extending upwards rather than outwards and impossible to access for the general public. As in hardly any other building, the Vertical Forest is showing the start of the "green" gentrification, escorted by "greenwashing".

In the continuing activity of what is now called the 'Dispersed Center' – Isola Art Center is operating from bars, bookshops, cultural associations, and local shops - and the associated project 'Isola Pepe Verde', aims to recover a derelict grey triangle of public land near the Porta Nuova and present it as a public garden.

BERT THEIS, artist, activist and sub-curator based in Milan and Luxembourg. He died in 2016. He was co-founder of Isola Art Center, out – Office for Urban Transformation and Isola Pepe Verde. His body of work is linked to the question of public space, combining the conceptual bearings of philosophy with the urban, social historical, and political specificities of the context in which it unfolds. His temporary and permanent "platforms" and "pavilions" in cities across Europe and Asia encourage participation by offering spaces of thought and exchange – "concrete utopias" to be appropriated by one and all. His monograph Some Works (ger/eng) was published by Hatje Cantz in 2003, and his second monograph Building Philosophy (fr/it/eng) by Domaine départemental de Chamarande, France in 2010.

MARIETTE SCHILTZ is a video maker and former social worker based in Milan and Luxembourg. Co-founder of Isola Art Center, out-Office for Urban Transformation and Isola Pepe Verde. Since 2001 she has been involved in the coordination of the different art projects in the Isola district. She has produced several videos about the history of the Isola conflict: Ondanomala, it/f, for Mamco, Geneva 2003; Isola Nostra, it/eng, for 10th International Istanbul Biennial 2007; Isola, a neo-liberal Italian tale, it/eng, for the Tirana Contemporary Art Biennial 2009.

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The activities of the Dispersed Center aim to demarcate a space for thought and action, here 'Site Specifity' becomes 'Fight-Specifity' (a term coined by Bert Theis). The artists, cooperating with the residents, organize alternative plans to the demolition programs of the investors, plant illegal immigrated palm trees, organize productions of desires and workshops with children and adults, singing songs by Adriano Celentano to the decision-making city officials (in a choir in the Zone Council) – and so they shifted the weight and public opinion more and more in their direction.

In recent years, the work and deliberation that took place at the Isola Art Center generated useful elements and concepts for the development of a theory on how art can act outside the white cube (museums and galleries), based on the fundamental elements of a given context: the people who live and work there.

When the specificity of the site coincides with a conflictual setting, it takes on new perspectives, even more so if its actual venue is temporary and dislocated. Working without a fixed space is a challenge, but it reflects the situation of many people in the world, who live (or survive) in precarious situations.

Projects like this have an ultra-local dimension, but are connected to a network of peers where experiences and collaborations are confronted at national and international levels. They could be defined as glocal practices. Some of the movements operating in Europe include: Park Fiction in Hamburg, which has been fighting to save a park from property speculation for eight years; the Lagunillas neighborhood in Malaga, fighting against the tourist industry; the Victoria Square Project in Athens, a center for culture and community in a neighborhood with many immigrants; R-Urban near Paris, a network of urban resilience. They are all territories of social, political and economic conflict, where artists and activists are working side by side with the residents to reform or implement urban policies.

ENRICO LUNGHI studied art history. He was assistant at the National Museum of Luxembourg, then artistic director of Casino Luxembourg. From 2009 to 2016 he was general director of Mudam Luxembourg. He curated the Venice biennale projects of Bert Theis (Potemkin Lock, 1995), Simone Decker (Chewing and Folding projects, 1999), Jill Mercedes (Endless Lust, 2007) and Jacques Charlier (100 sexes d'artistes, 2009). From 2005 to 2011, he was president of the IKT. Since 2017, he teaches at the University of Luxembourg.

ESTELLE EVRARD holds a PhD in Geography. She is a Senior researcher at the University of Luxembourg, and Honorary Associate Professor, Bartlett School of Planning, UCL (2022-2026). Her research deals with unequal geographies in the European context. Working with spatial justice, action research and art-based interventions in the public space, she explores how less well-off (i.e. cross-border, post-industrial) localities seize local autonomy to shape their own development. She has been part of the Common Wealth collective (2019) and has coordinated the E22 REMIX PLACE project (2021-22).

FURTHER READING:

Antonio Brizioli, Paolo Caffoni, Chiara Figone, Steve Piccolo, Mariette Schiltz, Bert Theis, eds. *Fight-Specific Isola*, Archive Books, Berlin, 2013. English and Italian edition.

David Hamers, Naomi Bueno de Mesquita, Annelies Vaneycken & Jessica Schoffelen eds. *Trading Places. Practices of Public Participation in Art and Design Research.* dpr-barcelona, 2017.