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9

– Spring/Summer 2004

Contextual Essays Artists 

Confessions of a Global Urbanist Jan Verwoert



I. In Theory

In the affluent societies of the West, economic 'crisis' is usually portrayed as a temporary state of emergency. In other countries around the globe that have come to bear the full force of the negative economic, ecological and social consequences that the economies of the 'first world' skilfully externalise, crisis has become a habitual state of normality. In capitalism, the only way to produce and secure profit for some is to make sure that others pay the costs. Keeping the countries of the 'third world' in a deadlock of permanent crisis - so the general theory goes - allows the 'first world' to retain its privileges by covertly ensuring the continued economic dependence of the former colonial states (and by now partially also the states of the collapsed Soviet Union). In this theory capitalism not only produces but also instrumentalises the forces of crisis to sustain the relations of exploitation that form its basis.

In his recent writings, Immanuel Wallerstein proposes a different perspective.¹ He asserts that the crisis currently generated by the global economy is about to reach a climatic point at which it will no longer be manageable according to capitalist interests and cause a terminal breakdown of the entire system. Basically, his argument is that the established capitalist strategy to increase profit (that is to cut the costs of production) by lowering wages, evading taxes and refusing responsibility for social welfare and environmental protection have been exhausted. The crisis caused by these policies on a global scale is simply too vast and the irreversible damage to the environment has reached catastrophic levels. Moreover, the reckless politics of transnational corporations have undermined the authority of the state whilst the state has been capitalism's most vital ally. History has shown the state to be the only institution that could keep the exploited parts of the population in check (and thus secure the conditions of their continued exploitation) through the imposition of sanctions or the pacification of social demands by means of moderate redistribution. By destabilising the state, capitalism weakens the very institution that could administer the crisis it perpetuates. After the erosion of state authority, deregulated capitalism produces, in Wallerstein's view, the moments of social unrest that we currently witness in those countries of the 'third world' or former Soviet Bloc belonging to the most underprivileged in the global economy. Now, these dramatic moments of social upheaval and environmental damage point towards moments of fundamental instability that will disrupt the cycle of capitalism's systemic self-reproduction. The crucial question is, what will emerge from these moments of crisis? 'Hell on earth' (as Wallerstein calls it), or possible alternatives to the principles of capital accumulation and uneven distribution of wealth?²

What sets Wallerstein's theory apart from common accounts of the global economy is the simple fact that he does not portray capitalism as a fully functional apparatus. He refutes the tacit assumption that capitalism has currently outmanoeuvred its historic competitors because it has proven to be the only practicable economic model. By highlighting

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capitalism's inherent (and potentially also terminal) moments of dysfunction, Wallerstein opens up a different perspective. His theory makes it entirely plausible to assume that alternatives to capitalism are both possible and workable. Moreover he draws attention to the fact that it is precisely from those areas where the crisis of global capitalism manifests itself most clearly that such alternative models might emerge.

In a sense, the outcome of Wallerstein's political theory could be seen as the point of departure for Marjetica Potrč's artistic practice. Her work can be described as ongoing research into workable alternatives to the capitalist growth economy developed in situations of economic, social or ecological crisis. This research process is grounded in personal experience - Potrč takes on the role of a global urbanist who, guided by information as much as by curiosity and chance encounters, travels to and between geopolitical hotspots. The subject of her interests are (amongst others) unregulated urban developments, improvised architectural structures or survival technologies that she discovers in the metropolitan centres and on the peripheries of India, Africa, North and South America, Western and Eastern Europe. Irrespective of their local origin and experimental nature, Potrč takes these structures and techniques very seriously. The horizon of her inquiries is comparable to that of Wallerstein's. It is a search for workable alternatives to capitalism on a global scale.

II. In Practice

For the presentation of the material Potrč gathers during her travels, she chooses different media. One prominent form is to document architectural phenomena, what Potrč terms 'case studies', through 1:1 reconstructions of exemplary buildings, such as the makeshift structure of a shantytown house, or prototypes of eco-friendly architecture assembled from recycled materials. In a similar way, Potrč has presented collections of technical instruments under the title *Power Tools* (2003) that utilise renewable energy or otherwise support independent self-sustainable models of life - such as a portable Fuel-Cell energy generator, a DIY solar oven, a manual battery charger for mobile phones, or an appliance found in South Africa that facilitates the transport of water by rolling a plastic barrel between handles like the wheel of a lawnmower. Parallel to these factual reproductions (or re-presentations) of buildings and objects, Potrč produces essays on urbanism and related subjects. Written from the perspective of theoretical analysis, these essays nevertheless rely heavily on Potrč's personal experience as she regularly frames her observations with narrative accounts of her journeys and the particular circumstances under which she encountered the phenomenon in question. They read like the travelogues of an urban critic on a global search for local instances of inventive practices of building architecture and organising life. Personal photographs of the urban situations Potrč discusses often accompany these texts. For instance, her reflections on the function of the symbolic borderlines between urban communities in the essay 'What's in the Cities' (2000) is illustrated with a snapshot of the wall that separates the Catholic and Protestant communities in Belfast alongside another photo of the snow-covered allotment gardens that form the invisible city limit of Ljubljana.³ Juxtaposed in this way, the images exemplify the difference between marked and unmarked urban boundaries as argued in the text. In other cases, photos are presented less as factual reference material than as evocative allegories of contemporary urban life. *Animal Sightings* (2001) are digitally reworked snapshots of wild animals invading city spaces: a coyote trapped in an elevator, a polar bear contemplating the view of an urban skyline from the roof of a house, or a raccoon feasting on human waste.

The medium in which Potrč reintegrates these diverse forms of presentation and inquiry is the Internet. Her website (www.potrc.org) gives access to documentation of her architectural reconstructions, her writings and photographs. In its function as a database the site works like a virtual archive containing a continuously expanding body of knowledge about urban and technological developments produced in the process of her work. At the same time, Potrč uses the site as a virtual forum for the promotion of progressive schemes of urban development. Under the title *Urban Independent* she documents (and in a sense also advertises) the work of a series of organisations. These include: the annual Burning Man festival in the Black Rock Desert, Nevada USA, where participants build temporary architecture and improvised structures from basic modular elements in the spirit of Buckminster Fuller; Barefoot College in Tilonia, India, where research and teaching brings

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Into Africa

together local knowledge with the advanced technologies of regenerative energy harvesting to create architecture for self-sufficient communities; the East Wahdat Upgrading Programme in Amman, Jordan, which supports the inhabitants of unregulated shantytown settlements by providing road access and so-called 'core-units', modular huts with running water and a connection to the sewage system and electricity grid around which future settlers can assemble their own shanty structures; the Leidsche Rijn, a major housing development in Utrecht, Netherlands, which benefits from eco-friendly technologies such as water harvesting; and finally the Rural Studio in Alabama, which explores concepts of self-sustainable architecture assembled from recycled materials including industrial waste such as car parts. Each project is introduced by a short summary and a standard questionnaire (featuring basic questions such as 'Whose community is it?', or 'What models did you look at while developing this project?') answered by a member of the respective organisation. *Urban Independent* thus establishes a structure of connections and cross-references. Potrč's website creates links between the different organisations and in this sense portrays their individual local work as a joint effort. It also creates a link to these local projects in the sense that the site operates like a portal leading to the web pages of the different organisations. In both of these senses Potrč's site could be said to work as a promotional tool. Finally the site links the general discourse about alternative urban structures arising from the survey and comparison of existing projects to specific instances of Potrč's own work. She has presented life-size reproductions of exemplary structures developed by each of the featured organisations in her exhibitions over the last years.⁴

Apart from its function as an archive, promotional tool and platform for establishing a system of links, the website is also interesting in aesthetic terms due to the peculiar way in which Potrč amalgamates public and personal modes of representation in this virtual space. While projects such as *Urban Independent* are presented in the rhetorical register of engaged promotion and functional information - and thus clearly address a politically interested public - other sections of the site set a more private tone. If Potrč's essayistic reflections always border on personal story telling, this aspect is stressed even more in the web-diary *Virtual Urban* (2000). The diary is based on texts that resulted from an extended e-mail exchange between Potrč and the Belfast-based artist Aisling O'Beirn, as well as additional material donated by other web surfers. Short aphoristic reflections on cities and architecture, as well as photographs of buildings and urban situations, are connected in a non-linear network of links. Reading this polyphonic diary feels like tapping into the intersecting streams of consciousness of different urban travellers. On the whole, it is interesting to see how, in her work, Potrč consequently and consistently focuses on a selected number of issues - and at the same time continues to vary the formats of her practice and the rhetorical modes in which she addresses her subject(s) and audience(s).

It seems that even though Potrč, in general, prefers the transparent presentation of content to the elaboration of subjective artistic style, her authorial position is manifested in the attitude underlying different formats of presentation. You could say her agency qualifies itself as that of a mediator with an attitude. In those works with an essayistic, aphoristic or narrative form, this attitude is clearly articulated as a fascination for individual types of architecture born out of experiments in the face of social, economical or ecological crisis. In the perspective of this articulated fascination, even her uncommented presentations of architectural structures in exhibition contexts appear in a different light: less like a sober presentation of facts but more like an argument, or rather, a proposition. If in a work such as *Duncan Village Core Unit* (2002), for instance, Potrč reproduces a service core unit installed by the city of East London, South Africa, for prospective shantytown settlements, this gesture seems to communicate the basic statement: 'I argue: This is a good solution. I propose: This could be a practicable model for other places and future developments.' Literally the work is a documentation of facts. Figuratively, however, it is the declaration of a hypothesis: what if we take this to be the future of architecture? Then the translocation of the service core unit changes its status. In the context of its primary use, the meaning of the unit is determined by its functional necessity. In the context of art, its functionality becomes a theoretical possibility - a model. This also means that by translating this architectural structure from a context of literal use to a context of theoretical reflection Potrč attributes significance to this structure on a different scale. She raises the stakes. As she stages a specific architectural solution to a local problem as a model, she proposes it to be an exemplary solution in a global context of growing urban deregulation and economic

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I saw my first work by Manfred Pernice at an art fair. Initially I didn't see it at all. During the preview, I found myself walking past a booth and afterwards all I could remember was some kind of unfinished situation that

crisis - pioneer examples of a future, creative, individualist architecture and a utopian technology of change.

III. In Question

The core unit is a recurring motive in Potrč's work. In 1997 she exhibited *The Core Unit* at the Skulptur Projekte Münster, a small shack made of red bricks with a sink unit in front and a toilet inside, modelled after identical structures installed in South American suburban housing programmes. The following core unit was named after the specific context of its installation in Amman, Jordan, *East Wahdat: Upgrading Program* (1999-2003). It exists in four different versions. Similar in structure, the basic brick shack containing a toilet (in two versions) was painted in bright colours. An oil barrel for water storage and (in three versions) a satellite dish were installed on its roof. *The Aranya Core Unit* (2002), a blue brick shack with two water barrels on its roof resembled the units used by Aranya Community Housing in Aranya, Indore, India. *The Kagiso: Skeleton House* (2001) documents constructions in the suburbs of Johannesburg. A makeshift brick structure with a satellite dish was juxtaposed with a core building, this time without walls but with a green plastic roof on metal stilts, a toilet bowl and a water pipe ending in a tab. *The Duncan Village Core Unit* (2002-03) is possibly the most futuristic looking of all units. Painted bright blue (in two of its versions) the basic brick shack comes equipped with a huge plastic water barrel supported by a trunk, a satellite dish and a solar panel. Here Potrč visibly augments the reality of the unit found in South Africa with technological facilities that stress the utopian perspective of its potential future use.

A sceptic might ask some of the following questions. Is it a politically legitimate gesture to appropriate architectural forms born from need and necessity and restage them in the context of art discourse? Or is this translation of reality into a model a way of turning the manifestations of crisis into a commodity that satisfies the needs of a minority of (Western) intellectuals to contemplate the discontents of globalisation? What criteria can there be to ground this judgement? An obvious criterion would be to compare the use of the architectural structure in the different contexts of its installation. In its primary context a core unit is produced in order to be used by the members of a specific local community. But what is the use of the unit in the art context? It is used to raise consciousness, to make people aware of how the reality of urban infrastructure - that is, the reality of what a city is - currently is transformed and with the prospect that in the future more and more cities will be structured in a similar way. It makes you aware that the conventional model of the well-administered urban space can and should no longer be seen as a normative ideal. To create public awareness for invisible, or rather underrepresented, developments of political importance is a classic motivation and legitimisation for engaged documentaries and critical journalism. Along the lines of this argument Potrč writes: 'In an effort to acquaint the public with a work that, in my view, is making a difference in architecture today, I have presented various examples of architecture from around the world as "case studies" in galleries and museums.'⁵ In other words, similar to any kind of effort to create a critical public for an issue, Potrč's work could be said to receive its political legitimisation in the context of the modern discourse of enlightenment. To call the necessity of this discourse of enlightenment into question would be highly sophistic.

Still, the sceptic might raise the question: Who is the subject of this discourse? Who is the public that Potrč's work addresses? In the context of its primary use the addressee of the *Duncan Village Core Unit* is utterly unambiguous. It is the community of Duncan Village. But *for whom* is the unit then put in the gallery space? Questions concerning the nature of the art public are notoriously difficult to answer. The obvious reply would be to define the art audience as middle class, more-or-less educated and mildly self-indulgent. Against the backdrop of this definition, it is of course highly questionable whether any attempt to create political awareness in bourgeois culture can ever be more than just another futile appeal to the proverbial liberal guilt complex. Admittedly, this cynical view of the art public is highly reductive. Yet, what is the alternative? The implicit assumption on which not only Potrč grounds her work but on which any attempt to stage a discourse of cultural criticism in the art context relies (including, of course, the pretensions of this article), is that in an information society the public reached by art is comparable to any other public reached by a contemporary information medium. The media space offered by an art exhibition or art magazine would thus basically be treated as having the same *quality* as the media space in

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The Administrative Sublime, or The Center for Land Use Interpretation

Behind an anonymous grey brick storefront, on a relatively nondescript section of Venice Boulevard in West Los Angeles is The Center for Land Use Interpretation. Driving past with the steady flow of traffic, the Center fades into the atmosphere...

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a newspaper - even though the *quantity* of possible recipients might differ. Then, if media space in art, like any other media space, can function as a vehicle to proliferate information and critical ideas, why not use this space?

Yet the question remains whether these hypothetical mature consumers of information are really the recipients of critical art discourse. The debate resembles that of the sceptic reasoning with the pragmatist in that there won't be an entirely convincing solution to the argument. In the end, it can just be observed that the pragmatic approach to the art public - be it that of blockbuster shows like the Venice Biennale or Documenta - as another media space in which to distribute critical information, is an approach that has established itself as a workable practice. However, the sceptic might not be entirely convinced. After all, he or she could insist, the conditions under which information material is presented in the space of art will necessarily influence the way in which this material is then received. Inevitably, the form of the exhibition will aestheticise the information. The architectural structure of the *Duncan Village Core Unit*, for instance, will first of all be perceived as a sculpture. Yet, as a sculpture, it would seem natural to interpret the literal object figuratively - as a symbol for an abstract concept, which in Potrc's case seems justified given that the particular structure reproduced in the exhibition space actually appears to work as a symbolic stand-in for a general notion of deregulated urban space. Now the question becomes whether the true problematic dimension of the phenomenon of shantytown growth is not lost in the translation of reality into a symbol? Does the reality speak through its symbol? Or does the symbol obscure the real problem by making it the object of a speculative discourse? To put it differently, the translocation of the *Duncan Village Core Unit* to the art context inevitably situates the piece in an artistic discourse about the symbolic use of architectural elements in (or as) sculpture - represented by artists as diverse as Andrea Zittel, Manfred Pernice or Isa Genzken.

The comparison of Potrc's work with that of Zittel in particular does not seem too far-fetched since both stage architectural structures that empower individuals to lead self-sufficient urban lifestyles in a situation of social deregulation. Both artists use architectural structures as symbols for a contemporary dialectic of crisis and survival. Examples of Zittel's work that come to the mind might be her *Living Unit* (1994), a transportable system of collapsible modular furniture designed to meet all basic requirements of modern urban life (work, eat, sleep), and *Escape Vehicle* (1996), a series of aircraft luggage containers converted into a micro-mobile homes. These works are vivid symbols for the uprooted life of a flexible urban professional. Moreover, they are not neutral. They embrace and celebrate the 'nomadic' quality of the flexible lifestyle they symbolise.

So does Potrc's work function according to similar principles to Zittel's? By staging as sculptures the actual props of survival under the conditions of urban deregulation, is she thereby also celebrating structures born from brute necessity as an aesthetically attractive architecture for nomadic living? The promotional gesture that underlies Potrc's work to a certain degree could be seen to have precisely this effect. Potrc promotes the concept of installing core units in slum areas as a good solution - quite effectively by making such a unit look as aesthetically pleasing in a white cube as a good sculpture would do. The seemingly improvised yet obviously functional composition of raw architectural elements is fascinating in formal terms. However, does this aesthetic aura preclude a critical assessment of the socio-political phenomena it refers to? The answer has to be no. For, contrary to Zittel, Potrc does not dissociate the symbolic structure she displays in the exhibition space from its point of reference in the outside world. While Zittel's structures are self-sufficient fetishes of modern life, the structures Potrc presents do not suffice themselves in the art space. They are visibly out of place. They lack life. In this sense they point to the reality from which they have been plucked - just as a fragment refers to an absent whole. The structure asserts itself as a part of reality (it proclaims: 'this is a core unit'). At the same time it denies its status as real by leaving no doubt that the reality of which it is a part is something and somewhere entirely else, in the Duncan Village (so it also proclaims: 'this is not a core unit').⁶ The work both facilitates a discourse about that reality by referring quite unambiguously to a very specific geopolitical situation and emphasises the fact that this discourse is based on representations and thus not congruous with the reality to which it refers.

Granted, there are good reasons for the artistic form of Potrc's work, the sceptic might

argue, but what about her political position? Potrč promotes the installation of core units in slum areas as a form of progressive politics. It very well may be that to acknowledge and support rather than deny and repress the deregulated growth of shantytowns is essentially the right thing to do. Yet this strategy might also be another example of the familiar pacification tactic of liberal governments moderating social problems to maintain the status quo. Whenever the crisis caused by capitalist exploitation threatens social unrest, an established state tactic to preserve social order and guarantee the continued growth of the economy is to make limited concessions to the exploited. As it is usually only when a point of imminent chaos arises that industry calls for the state to step in, does it not seem that the very logic of state-sponsored crisis management in the service of capitalist interests is at play in the installation of core units? Industry refuses to take responsibility for the housing of the workers (unlike at the beginning of the industrial age) yet it also wants to avoid a situation where the workforce is physically drained by intolerable living conditions. So it turns to the state to take responsibility for the housing situation and ensure the basic survival of impoverished proletarians. In this way, local 'democracy' is made accountable for the disastrous external consequences of an economy that is no longer bound by any social contract.⁷

This much is true, but the pragmatist will also respond by asking whether it is not overly hypocritical to question the political legitimacy of social housing programmes. It might be that these programmes reflect a problematic situation in which communities become involuntary caretakers for irresponsible corporations, but then what alternatives are there? The only solution to the crisis that the sceptic can provide is a prognosis of imminent apocalypse. The full social consequences of capitalist exploitation would certainly become clear in all its brutality if they were not moderated and made tolerable by social programmes. But who profits from the revelation of un-moderated brutality, certainly not the people who suffer it? If 'the working class' has any meaning, it is no longer in terms of a revolutionary collective empowered by the terminal collapse of capitalism. The proletariat has lost its plausibility in the face of globalisation and a politics of pragmatic solutions to particular problems might be the only practicable foundation for a critique of capitalism, not least because it addresses the specific needs of the victims of exploitation. On the whole, it seems that Marjetica Potrč defends this pragmatist position in the face of global crisis. It is quite clear that she does not sell big utopias. Still, she takes the utopian implications of local projects seriously on a global scale, acknowledging the devastating social and ecological consequences produced by a global regime of capitalist exploitation. By taking a closer look at certain local developments - such as the urban logic of moderated shantytown growth - she simply suggests a possible positive (or at least less judgmental) re-evaluation of phenomena that are often rashly interpreted as exclusively negative. You might say that, with a surprisingly non-cynical attitude, Potrč promotes hopeful projects in hopeless situations. In this sense the political outlook articulated by her work is that of nihilistic optimist - or optimistic nihilist.

— Jan Verwoert

Footnotes

1. See, for instance, Immanuel Wallerstein, *Utopistics*, New York: The New Press, 1998
2. Of course, to describe situations of crisis as crucial periods of transition is a more or less predictable rhetorical move (especially when the diagnosis of crisis, as it is the case in Wallerstein's theory, is framed by a post-socialist utopian agenda). Still, Wallerstein's observations seem plausible and useful in the sense that they draw attention to the significance and potential implications of the social, economic and environmental points of crisis that capitalism currently produces in different regions around the globe.
3. Published in *Manifesta 3*, Newsletter 1, Ljubljana, 2000
4. The series of works in which Potrč reconstructs structures developed by the different organisations featured in the Urban Independent project includes: Barefoot College: A House (2002), displayed in the Max Protech Gallery, New York; Rural Studio: Mason's Bend Community Center (2002), presented in the exhibition 'Extreme Conditions and Noble Designs' in the Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach; Rural Studio: Butterfly House (2002), shown in 'Designs for the Real World' at the Generali Foundation, Vienna. A greenhouse modelled after structures in the Leidsche Rijn was presented in 'The Pursuit of Happiness' in the Kunsthalle Bern, entitled Leidsche Rijn

House (2003), together with a selection of Burning Man Structures (2003). Improvised structures from the Burning Man festival had previously been displayed together with structures from the Barefoot College, Hybrid: Burning Man and Barefoot College (2002), in the exhibition 'Housing' at the Westfälischer Kunstverein Münster. A version of the core unit modelled after the ones found in Amman, Jordan, East Wahdat: Upgrading Program (1999-2003) was shown in the exhibition '50 Years of Central European Art' in Vienna, Miami, Berlin and Bern.

5. Marjetica Potrc, 'Five ways to Urban Independence', in *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer* (exh. cat.), Venice: Venice Biennale, 2003, p.272
6. In this sense, Potrc's pieces inhabit the ambiguous space of objects that are simultaneously real and symbolic artefacts opened up by surrealist sculpture and painting, where pipes, indoor palm trees and sanitary fixtures can be presented to exhibit first of all the difference and multiple interferences between reality and its representations.
7. The complementary phenomenon in the urban centres of the Western world is the strategy of seducing global companies to settle in the city by financing the development of former industrial areas into attractive office locations. Yet city councils usually never receive much in return for this urban development. In Germany, Hamburg (for instance) recently invested more than €600 million into the development of a nature reserve [!] into a runway extension for the testing range of the EADS (European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company), which is partially owned by Daimler Chrysler, as the company threatened to move its construction site for the new Airbus A380 elsewhere if the city didn't comply. Now, after the completion of the extension, the EADS has simply stepped back from its promises to the city for financial compensation and the city council effectively gets nothing in return for the development it has paid for. The only gain Hamburg receives is one of symbolic nature. It can pride itself on still playing host to Daimler Chrysler.