Echo contra Image

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Over the course of history, much art has been made and commissioned – and continues being made and commissioned to this day to be installed in a specific place, most often a museum or gallery. Yet not much of contemporary art production could, in fact, be termed "site-specific" anymore. The notion of site-specificity was first coined in the US in the early seventies as a way to nominally distinguish artworks made in response to the environment, supposedly natural, or one transformed by human activity, from those many artworks destined to rest forever in museums. The site-specific works were often under- stood by their makers as interventions, as measured polemical gestures resulting from a process that involved the research and interpretation of the site's physical (topographical and environmental) aspects, but also its symbolic, historical, and sociopolitical characteristics. At present, the term "site-specific" seems to be losing much of its critical edge. It appears to be ossifying into a merely technical category, or worse, is often misused as a way to label an aesthetic form drained of political content. Today, further, and much too often, the adjective "site-specific" describes works that, although obviously "taking place in" and "fitting into" a given space, do not at all aim at transforming or even commenting on that site's parameters and various hidden constraints. Instead, such works remain comfortably located within the confines of the very institutions – museums and galleries, as well as locations in public or corporate buildings, their surroundings and the urban schemes they belong to – that the pioneering, confrontational site-specific works by neo-avant-garde artists such as Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, and Michael Asher once denounced as reactionary and corrupt. More and more regularly, the word "site-specific" is deployed as the equivalent of "outdoor" in relation to public sculpture, while in the international lingo of art dealers and collectors it refers simply to works that are too large or complex to be shipped or moved elsewhere and that are thus doomed to disappear when the show is over. The specific object with its specific form, once devised as a dialectical tool to shed light on the received notions of the site, has become a complacent, decorative, or at best neutral part of the current ideological stalemate. It is not surprising, then, that the function of the specific placement of the artwork has become, once again, a central issue, particularly in some of the more interesting critical artistic practices of today. Bettina Pousttchi was born in Mainz, Germany, in 1971, just one year after French conceptual artist Daniel Buren published his essay *Le fonction de l'atelier (The Function of the Studio)[1],* which demystified the last metaphysical refuge left to artists after the position of the museum had become the subject of fierce critique in the preceding years. Recently, Pousttchi has received due attention for her large-scale, site-specific photographic works such as *Echo*, realized in 2009 and 2010. The project involved covering all four elevations of the Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin, built in 2008 by Adolf Krischanitz and situated in the historical centre of the city, with a huge "billboard" featuring a digitally manipulated assemblage of archival images of the nearby Palast der Republik, which, in spite of many discussions, had already been demolished at the time of the making of Pousttchi's work to make room for the future reconstruction of the 18th-century Berliner Stadtschloss. The Palast der Republik, a landmark of late Eastern-European modernism, was designed by Heinz

Graffunder (1926-1994) and completed in 1976, when it became the seat of the German Democratic Republic's Volkskammer (parliament). For *Echo*, Pousttchi's black-and-white, digitally multiplied fragments of the palace's glass elevations articulated with concrete pilasters temporarily replaced the perfect neutrality of the Temporäre Kunsthalle's white cube. In this "battle of fake façades," as the artist puts it, the Kunsthalle, the Palast der Republik, and Pousttchi's own work that mediated between the two, all met their inevitable end.

Echo was duly taken down in 2010 after its scheduled six-month-long presentation. Most of the Palast der Republik's steel girders were sold to the United Arab Emirates and used to construct the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, which, at 828 meters, is now the tallest building in the world. Habent sua fata aedificia – finally, the Temporäre Kunsthalle also closed in August 2010, according to plan. Although the word "echo" seems at first to connote a sonic experience, in Pousttchi's work echoing seems to be inextricably bound with concrete spatial, material, and even historical context. In order to make the Temporäre Kunsthalle and the Palast der Republik "echo" each other, the artist initiated the transfer of images across time and space, whereupon the building created as a neutral, temporary container for art (with just 600 square meters of exhibition space inside, but tripled on the outside by 1700 square meters of elevations suitable to accommodate any two-dimensional work of art facing the city), changes skin to become an image of another one. And one that is constructed just a stone's throw away but in a very different ideological context, for different purposes and in a different state – that of the GDR.

If the use of billboard paper to cover all elevations of the building underscores the temporariness of the Kunsthalle (and ironically relates to the employment of the very same technique in real-estate advertising), the building fully enveloped in large sheets of printed paper also brings to mind a range of art-historical references. Christo, Raymond Hains, and Jacques Villeglé are all invoked, as is the Internationale Situationiste acting up against the state-administrated affichage interdit, and the radical Jewish artists loosely grouped into the NO!art movement in early-sixties-era NewYork, who collaged torn pictures of porn stars and Holocaust victims in an attempt to tear through the curtains of the contemporary spectacle of images. Finally, *Echo* also brings to mind seminal works by Felix Gonzalez Torres in which personal, highly coded texts and images were distributed as simultaneously disturbing and poetic messages on billboards in the city space.

Echo Berlin (2009/10), Pousttchi's series of twenty-four color photographs created in the six months during which the *Echo* installation was on view, is a much-layered portrayal of this black-and-white photo installation's powerful persistence among the iconic buildings that surrounded it, including the Berliner Dom, the Alte Nationalgalerie, the GDR-built Fernsehturm (which, at 368 metres, is still the tallest structure in Germany), and the uncovered foundations of the original Berliner Stadtschloss. Nestled in between the prominent edifices that fill Pousttchi's color images, advertising banners that simulate façades of yet other buildings-to-be can be glimpsed, including a giant digital rendering of the façade of the planned reconstruction of Schinkelsche Bauakademie. As can be deduced from this photographic series, *Echo* served as a kind of fixed reference point for its architectural environs, which were undergoing a rapid transformation at the time of the work's installation. Echoing built, yet unbuilt, already demolished and never-to-be-built edifices, *Echo* functioned not only as a singular image, but also as a two-way mirror and permeable membrane, a device enabling the viewing and reviewing

of conflicted ideological positions, changing economic interests, and political arguments that have been shaping the city in our time.

Other works by Pousttchi are equally invested in shifting ideological and temporal concerns. Take *Conversations in the Studio 3* (2010) a recent video work that premiered in the artist's solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel in 2011. The piece was created in two steps. First, Pousttchi filmed a conversation between herself and Buren, who in the late sixties began to work in situ, and thus abandoned conventional modes of art presentation in an attempt to evade restrictions imposed by institutionalized art spaces in favor of the nomadic marking of different sites and "portable" presentations of work. Buren's practice provided a pointed critique of the artist's compromised and fixed position within the art system, in which the studio plays the fundamentally strategic role of a hideout, as well as of a privileged place where the work is produced and presented for the first time. Accordingly, Pousttchi and Buren's informal conversation touches on many dimensions of the public art project's supposed publicness – and its pitfalls. Pousttchi realized the second phase of *Conversations in the Studio 3*'s development in Warsaw, in the atelier-apartment of the late Polish artist Edward Krasinski (1925-2004). Similar and in kinship to Buren's trademark vertical stripes on fabric, in 1969 Krasinski decided to suspend any gestural quality of his artwork through the use of the "blue scotch-tape strip" that he pasted horizontally on walls, objects, and artworks at the height of 130 centimeters. Six years later, in 1975, Buren executed his own work in situ on the windows of Krasinski's studio-apartment – exactly on the membrane between the studio (located on the top of a housing block in the center of Warsaw) and the "situation" of the buzzing city around it. Buren's piece, staged as it is in Krasinski's studio, is exceptional if one remembers that in The Function of the Studio essay Buren calls the studio "the ivory tower of production," which the work of art leaves only for a short time, to end up in "a citadel," or the museum.

For her video work, Pousttchi projected the carefully edited footage of her conversation with Buren on the walls and furniture in Krasinski's studio, thereby briefly animating the place with her "conversational" video piece, and then refilmed both her footage and the place where she projected it. Her projection also literally built on the presence of the many black-and-white photographs that Krasinski applied to his studio's walls and objects, which he used to double and mirror its spaces and objects. By commemorating visitors with small "photo-souvenirs" and installing works of art in the most unexpected nooks and crannies, Krasinski turned his studio, over many years, into his living-and-working site proper. To that end, Pousttchi inscribed her own investigative work, albeit again only temporarily, in the now petrified shape of the once-changing studio. With its three protagonists, the artists Buren and Pousttchi in conversation, and Krasinski in the background, *Conversations in the Studio 3* transcends real time and space, and with them, the very function of the studio. The video work also resembles (or echoes) *Echo* insofar as the latter can be seen as an attempt to stage a conversation – or provoke a polemic – between three discrete buildings.

Pousttchi's various sculptural works, meanwhile, make use of crowd-control barriers, those sculptures of public infrastructure designed to manage cheering crowds, parades, or demonstrations. In the series of *Double Monuments for Flavin and Tatlin* (2009-2010) the white-painted and vertically rising steel barriers have been twisted around and set atop each other to form structures resembling the seminal Monument to the Third International. Designed in 1920 by Vladimir Tatlin

(1885-1953) to commemorate the Bolshevik Revolution, the spiraling, 400-meter-tall high-rise was only finally realized as a model, which was then presented at the 1925 Paris Exposition Internationale. Conceived as a giant clock, with three parts of the structure rotating at different speeds and only completing one full rotation within a span of, respectively, one year, one month, and one hour, Tatlin's monument to the collective forces of revolution was also invoked in Dan Flavin's series of thirty-nine sculptures he called *Monuments to V. Tatlin* (1964-1990), which featured fluorescent light tubes arranged in shapes as disparate as a pyramid and an early skyscraper. With a dose of humor, Pousttchi's series pays homage to the champions of, respectively, Constructivism and Minimalism – or perhaps stages another battle, Tatlin versus Flavin, by piercing the steel structures of her *Double Monuments* with light tubes. Another group of works, *Blackout* (2007/2010) features several sculptures made of black-painted crowd barriers that appear to collapse languorously on white pedestals, as if mocking the modernist, semi-abstract figures of "reclining women" that populate sculpture gardens of museums of modern art around the world.

In her ongoing *World Time Clock* series (since 2008), Pousttchi photographs clocks on public buildings in different cities of the world (among them Shanghai, Istanbul, London, New York, Warsaw, Bangkok, and Seoul) that are located in different time zones. The clocks always show the same hour – five minutes to two – thus equating the remote locations through the sameness of the global, unified measure of time. This theme is also taken up in later work: Pousttchi's *Echo* installation featured images of two clocks, one set for five to one and facing West, the other set for five to two and facing East. Moreover, in the public work *Basel Time* (2010), the artist manipulated the image of the huge clock on the façade of the Hall 2 building at Art Basel's Messe complex (designed in 1953), and placed it on the façade of Hall 1 (designed in 1926), which was then slated for demolition in advance of an upcoming building project by Herzog & de Meuron (and which indeed has been taken down two years later). To that end, Pousttchi's *World Time Clock* series is an attempt to grasp something of the internal organization of the world today, in which reality has been replaced by a system of exchangeable appearances, a Potemkin global village ruled by the "universal clock" of a global economy.

Pousttchi reprises this interest in noting a brief interval and underscoring the gap between the clock time and the time embodied in material structures in two early video works: *Ocularis* (1999) and *Double Empire* (2000). Both expand the notion of parallax from the phenomenon associated with stereoscopic seeing to the doubling and splitting of the film's very subject. The meditative *Ocularis* features a slow pan out from the looming red-moon-like shape that fills the screen to the almost technical image of two oculars of the microscope. As the drop of blood in question disappears from view, the viewing device itself becomes exposed to our own observation. In contrast, and approximately the same 2:43 minutes long, *Double Empire* introduces the Empire State Building – the titular protagonist of Andy Warhol's eight-hour classic – reduced to a seemingly endless freefall along the stream of brightly lit windows and dark elevations of the building. Only at the end of the film does the camera reach the tall spire; the journey downward turns out to be a climb to the top. The building presents itself as a circuit without beginning or end, a perfect embodiment of the contemporary empire, with its accumulation of identical parts instead of any recognizable underlying structure.

The artist's early critical engagement with the façade or the "skin" of a building

reflects an important debate that is currently taking place in contemporary architectural practice and theory. The conflict between an architecture conceived as a screen for ahistorical projections of images, freely shaped by advanced building technologies, and one that remains conscious of its tectonic-constructive constituents and historical dimension, dialectically incorporating fragility, loss and change, is also at the heart of the current discussion regarding the reconstruction of historical buildings in Germany. For different reasons, but always with the intention of erasing the history, such buildings were either torn down by Nazi Germany, got destroyed by the Allies in the Second World War, or got lost in the German Democratic Republic. Today, many of these buildings return mostly as historical costumes applied on hollow volumes – with important exceptions. One is the reconstruction of the east wing of the Museum für Naturkunde in Berlin, completed by the office Diener & Diener in 2011. In it, missing parts of the elevation were fully replaced by a giant concrete cast, a 1:1 imprint of the wall taken from the still extant part of the identical elevation of the opposite wing of the museum, complete with holes left by bullets and shrapnel shells.

The most recent public work by Pousttchi, *Framework* (2012), made for Schirn Kunsthalle, is discussed in greater detail elsewhere in this volume. At the time of this writing, the piece is yet to be installed. But I shall describe it, speculatively, anyway: An 800-square-meter print on adhesive foil will fully cover the glazed upper part of the building's elevation just below roof level. The print's pattern is based on the geometric frameworks adorning the façades of Frankfurt's historical timber-frame houses, many of which were reconstructed in the eighties (more houses of this nature are soon to be reconstructed in the vicinity of the Schirn). In the hope of bringing the image of the historical center of Frankfurt one step closer to a never-attainable and idealized past, these reconstructed homes will replace some buildings erected after the Second World War. One of the postwar building constructions that are to be demolished in order to reinstate some lost history may be "Tisch" (Table), a monumental concrete canopy built by the German office BJSS (Dietrich Bangert, Bernd Jansen, Stefan Jan Scholz, and Axel Schultes) in 1986 as part of the Schirn Kunsthalle's complex. *Building Contra Image*, the title of Hal Foster's conversation with Richard Serra in the former's 2011 book The *Art-Architecture Complex*[2] aptly names the main protagonists of modern war in architecture. A well-tried tactic is to hit back with the enemy's own weapon, and that's what Pousttchi attempts to do, achieving victory by bringing her site-specific images as echoes to still extant buildings – and to the attention of those who would wish to turn them into images devoid of meaning.

Notes

[1] Daniel Buren, *Les écrits* (1965-1990), Bordeaux 1991,
Vol.1 (1965-1976), pp.195-205
[2] Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex*, London 2011,
pp.215-244