



## A review of A FUTURE ARCHEOLOGY. An International Space-Performance-Project designed for Berlin, Vienna & Cairo in 2013

*Peter Stamer, 2 March 2015*

### **Background**

The socio-political changes in Northern Africa and the Middle East since 2011 have resonated with an ongoing and wide-spread perception of crisis in Europe, begging the questions: What kind of society do we want to live in? What kind of conditions are necessary for this society to emerge? In 2013, twelve Egyptian and European artists, architects, and cultural workers from the fields of choreography, architecture, and theater addressed these questions in and for Berlin, Vienna, and Cairo. They worked to build spaces that might respond to the needs and questions of the local, cultural, and social contexts in which they were involved.

The **Berlin** slot (March 2013) was conceived to dig deeper into practices of collaboration, their conditions and politics. In the context of an already given art space, we created a walk-in “social sculpture” (Joseph Beuys), a habitat of togetherness within a dance studio. Moving on to **Vienna** in July/August 2013, the international working group, together with Viennese residents, set out to create a village-like compound consisting of huts and other dwellings on a construction site in the city’s 10<sup>th</sup> district. In **Cairo** (autumn 2013), the group wanted to invite activists and artists to create a space designed by and dedicated to contemporary performing arts. The construction sites in these three cities were meant to facilitate monuments of togetherness, to erect (con)temporary social architectures, to re-claim space as public domain and civic right. Due to the unexpected seizure of power by the Egyptian Armed Forces in summer 2013 (labeled a *coup d’état* by the Western media, a term which some Egyptian citizens were hesitant to use), and the reverberations thereof, the project ended prematurely in Vienna. And in this regard, the project’s grounding premise, somehow not fully realized, still bears some urgency.

## What was, what is at stake?

In both Europe and the Middle East, we are in need of spaces where we can develop and exercise “civic imagination” (Okwui Enwezor), a force of togetherness that unites around a common creative practice. We are in need of spaces of encounter where we condition and instigate an understanding of “agonistic plurality” (Chantal Mouffe) in order to challenge existing notions of community and communality. The question “what should a community look like where communality is produced amidst necessary difference” is of utmost urgency both for the future of Europe and the Middle East on their way to...where: democracy?

We still contend that the performing arts – practices, discourses, and theories – offer the proper platform for these questions, which at the moment seem to be unsolvable on a social level. These questions persist, however, because their solutions are a) too complex for the political agents currently in power, and b) since society does not hold open spaces to develop possible (and practical) models that could address the questions, while framing them within artistic ones. We understand that social crises in different societies often manifest as “crises of space.” In order to open “Other Spaces” (Foucault), we rely on the competence of choreographers, dancers, and other practitioners trained in taking space. Besides creating movement, choreography also renders visible the space in which movement takes place. Thus, space is never abstract, but a concrete social category. Choreographic methods, then, allow us to contemplate given spatial practices and read them as cultural phenomena. The buildings, habitats, and spatial structures we developed for Berlin, Vienna, and Cairo, were designed to recreate social conditions and to facilitate reflection on space. In regards to the local social conditions, we wanted to create spaces that not only allowed for asking the aforementioned questions, but were expressly interested in tackling these questions within the **process of building** itself. We thus set out to manufacture an “agora,” a public space for assembly. The title, *A Future Archeology*, underlined the conviction that existing social structures have to be revealed, have to be dug out, in order to understand their constructedness and to create new conditions for an alternative future.

## Civic spaces

From the very beginning of the project, we were interested in putting individual artistic styles aside and looking instead at the potentials of and conditions for politics instigated by artists, at the politics of art production, and at cultural policies. For those of us working in the field of choreography and engaged in choreographic thinking, the notion of creation and mobilization of space was already a focus of our practices. One of the main goals was

to create a shared space of being and working together, a space that tied together artistic practice and theoretical reflection, a space nourished by mutual interest in order to facilitate understanding and a politics of difference.

The political and social cataclysms taking place in Egypt and the Middle East rendered questions about spatiality even more urgent. Across the Arab World, modes of and channels for public expression, moderation, and mediation are severely controlled or suppressed – still. The uprising of disenfranchised Egyptian citizens against a brutal regime gained momentum as the actions turned Tahrir Square into a public space, rendering *vox populi* audible internationally. The square in Cairo's downtown, which until then was a neglected spot in the nation's mental topography, has played more than a symbolic role in the process of democratization. The masses of people taking to the streets, directing and formulating a public discourse reminiscent of the "agora," constituted a direct, immediate, and urgent mode of expression and formation that could be termed a process of "civility." The revolution's most striking feature in 2011/12 was thus the reappropriation of public space by the people and its transformation into a constitutive space. Yet, the lack of existing democratic protocols put tremendous and immediate pressure on the public space to fulfill too many roles in the self-representation of a nation.

From a non-Egyptian perspective, media reports on the revolution and its aftermath seemed to strike a chord in diverse threads of Western society. Since many people seem weary of what they experience as capitalist democracy, they eagerly took up the spirit of protest and publicized their critique of capitalism. In the so-called West, the repoliticization of space still aims mainly at abolishing neoliberal tendencies and corporate privatization of the public sector, and thus at reestablishing a commons. In Egypt, however, these movements have been more concerned with guaranteeing for citizens the rights of free speech and free assembly, the right to live in an uncontrolled society, to be governed by an elected parliament, to put an end to political nepotism; in short, to establish a democratic system worthy of that name.

Western democracies are by no means safe either. In fact, they are endangered by the so-called economic crisis and the forces responsible for it. They are also in danger because their peoples tend to confuse policies with politics. Where policies create diverse sets of rules to regulate and protect the interests of a few by establishing ideological and moral matrices, politics must provide the means to maintain conditions for mutual negotiation in order to grant the same rights and duties to everyone. Since corporate and other lobby groups pursue their policies by taking advantage of the underlying democratic principles provided by politics, it seems much easier for them to sell their agenda. Instituting a balance of different agendas is a highly important task for democratic structures, one which requires immediate attention and consistent civic commitment.

And yet, any comparison of the Egyptian revolution in 2011 with Western movements did not seem to be appropriate for our project. Glorification of the developments in Egypt by the West – as acts of a people on *their way* to democracy – speaks much more about the needs and projections of the West's own political shortcomings. In fact, there were and are more differences than similarities one can observe looking at the recent situation in Egypt in relation to public movements (such as Occupy and other leftist initiatives) in the U.S. and Europe. The body politics at stake in Egypt led also to another urgent question: *would political space remain accessible in the aftermath of the revolution, once parliament had seized control over the military?* We know now that the political developments in summer 2013 provided a devastating answer to this sorrow-stricken question, and turned scared “what ifs” into political facts: *what if the momentum of a political practice diminishes once politics is handed over to (elected) politicians who rule by the power of paper, by the power of laws and legislation? What if the country follows the choreography of a democracy, but neglects the performance that is needed to protect themselves from policies that turn public space into a space of commodities, into a space of sheer political interest? What if the idealistic power of envisioning one's own society dries up?* For the moment, it seems that the need for political stability extinguished the democratic sparks that, for a while at least, set an autocratically governed region on fire.

Driven by the enthusiasm of what seemed at the time like a new beginning, trying to make visible what Okwui Enwezor in a lecture at House of World Cultures in 2012 called “civic imagination,” the project *A Future Archeology* aimed to create a potential space for “a future” and to set its conditions at the same time. We were interested in creating spaces that conceived of the future as a site of archeological excavation of ideas and practices, which have not gained momentum so far. We wanted to historicize the future of society and politics with the help of choreographic thinking and spatial practice. We did not and still don't understand choreographies as merely aesthetic practices, but rather as methodologies for the creation of political spaces and the production of social knowledge. We wanted to set an example of and for togetherness, both a theoretical and a “real” space accessible to the public at any time, since the political crisis we are still facing has been, first and foremost, a crisis of space: a clash of private and public space, of advancing policies versus agonistic politics, of conditions that manifest themselves and the reverberations stemming from them, crystallizing in everyday life.

Thus, *A Future Archeology* was part of a project of re-democratization, making use of artistic practices and discourses, daring to dig out the future, daring to instigate a social archeology in order to create an inventory of social futurity. A main intervention of this project was to create and build spaces in which sharing, agonism, and production of community could be negotiated – achieving the creation of “*locus agonistes*” (Enwezor), of

spaces for common dispute and mutual creation, of a future for society and a society for the future.

### **Building togetherness together**

So, over the course of five months in 2013, a dozen artists committed to instigating processes of building together, investigating different notions of space, and investing in practices of mutual negotiation and agonism in Berlin, Vienna, and Cairo. We set out to construct buildings, always also taking the local conditions and particularities into account. The concept of “building” embraced any form a building might take on during the process: taking the shape of a simple hut or of a complex habitat depended on the negotiations the artists undertook with each other. It was not our aim to construct a blueprint beforehand, since we conceived of the negotiations to be an essential part of the creative process. We aimed at creating a multitude of spaces for mutual encounter by creating the conditions that constitute this work as such, by conceiving and building the spatial core that was needed for work and exchange. We literally erected a construction site where we stimulated democratic structures, becoming a group of builders that had to find rules of togetherness, of sharing, of a common practice. We were steered by the conviction that participants were mutually interested in one another, moved by one another, inspired by one another, sharing practices in order to exercise democracy and agonistic togetherness. We aimed at achieving cultural knowledge by intercultural exchange that goes beyond the lip service of cultural policy. In order to meet the given challenges and the stakes of the immediate environment and neighborhood, we were interested in a context-sensitive practice that integrated local knowledges. We wanted both the process of construction and the constructed buildings themselves to be used after the building process was complete. Our understanding and imagining of social, aesthetic, architectural space aimed at sustainability, so that the buildings could grant access to a multitude of diverse bodies afterwards. How could we institutionalize a building without running the risk of solely administrating it? To what kinds of local and international requirements did we want to craft a response? Which kinds of artistic work were the buildings supposed to bring forth, if any at all? And, looking back on all of this, how did we negotiate the practice of creating a “WE,” which was both the premise and the promise of and for “our” togetherness? How did “we” get along amidst the difficulties that presented themselves?

Since togetherness assumes the recognition of unconditional difference, *A Future Archeology* was meant to create a test field to approach questions and practices of dealing with one another in radically different ways. Radically different from the ways the world’s multiple crises seem to force us to relate, ways that lead to deprivation of the

other, to oppression, ways that seem to force us to yell louder in order to be heard, to place one's vision over the vision of the other, to dismiss her/him.

*A Future Archeology* thus had the chance to be a most political space, political in the sense of negotiating without superimposing, finding ways together without policing, collaborating without egotism. Understanding this precious notion of "WITHOUT" turned out to be the biggest challenge, since it opened possibilities that were not fixed, crystallized, solidified. WITHOUT was fragile, and its fragility mandated that we deal with just that, to take care of it, to water it. This WITHOUT, however, was and is not "whatever." It was not, nor should it have been, vague or superfluous, it was meant to be the WITHOUT that should hold the project together, however paradoxical that might seem.

### **Building on without**

Building the building (both the edifice and the togetherness) was steered by a set of ethical protocols that embraced, in one way or another, the notion of withoutness:

- We conceived of collaboration as an action without assignment. Doing what is necessary without imposing it or letting it go. Laissez-faire, often understood as "anything goes" and thus suspected to be arbitrary, meant something different for us: to "make doing." There was an important ethical momentum that foregrounded the question "what can I do," rather than "what am I SUPPOSED to do." If an individual wants to initiate change, s/he is asked to undertake the necessary steps instead of waiting for someone else to undertake them. Thus, our working space was free of any kind of policing.
- We acted on the assumption that creativity is a basic artistic motive that articulates itself within the practice and willingness to create. It is this understanding of creativity, in the sense of self-empowerment for action, that we advocated with this project. Thus, the aim of working was not to produce, but to do a job well for its own sake. Doing a job well means to take into account what the job requires: nothing more and nothing less. We attempted to render personal authorship obsolete in favor of the objective.
- Process/product were both regarded to be the cause and result of a common learning process in which everyone was equally regarded as (not) knowing. Thus, we wanted to share a working and thinking practice that was executed from a common starting point. We wanted to start from a ground zero and to attempt to find out more about the next steps together. This did not attempt to dismiss the diversity of knowledges

present in the group; to the contrary, it was supposed to *support* diversity, since we did not conceive of knowledge as a reflection on personal status.

- Production of process and product followed the participants' mutual willingness to understand each other. Mutuality was based on the attempt to understand the other, but not on mutual agreement. To agree or disagree necessitated an attempt at understanding in the first place. This was subject to negotiations where the conditions of understanding were themselves subject to scrutiny.
- Responsibility stemmed from responsiveness, in the same way that response stemmed from responsibility: shared responsibility did not mean to ask for already given answers, but rather to look for responses.
- We did not attempt to distinguish between value-adding or non-value-adding labor. Any process taking place within these months was considered part of the building process. Accordingly, we did not distinguish between material and non-material work, just as we did not distinguish between process and result.

Our first stop at Uferstudios Berlin in March 2013 – documented in Thomas Martius' [filmic essay](#) – did not only produce a series of spatial and intensely public encounters; we also acquired physical experience, manual skills we were then able to apply during our Viennese phase. In general, as knowledge and experience grew, and as more people became involved in the project, the more we were eager to present the project at diverse institutions and invite them to collaborate. Taking on the concept of a “platform,” the project *A Future Archeology* wanted to be developed continuously to become a space of reflection also outside of Berlin, Vienna, and Cairo, since we were convinced that our questions were of both translocal interest and international relevance. For now, the project has come to an end though it is not finished...

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*A Future Archeology* was initiated by Bake, Fayed, Hafez, Stamer.

By and with Silke Bake (DE), Igor Dobricic (NL/RS), Ismail Fayed (EG), Adham Hafez (EG), Peter Stamer (AT/DE), Christine Standfest (AT/DE), Bettina Vismann (DE) and Kegham Djeghalian (FR/EG/AM), Lisa Hinterreithner (AT), Jens Junker (DE), Mey Sefan (DE/SY), Deborah Stokes (GB), Hannes Wurm (AT) and more than 50 guests, passers-by and workshop participants

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