

Materiality as performance: blurring the boundaries between the real and the imagined

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This is a dual paper in which I will introduce the notion of 'materiality as performance'. Materiality as performance is a dialectical approach to urban space. It seeks to interrogate the interplay between the imagined and the material, and this way provide a powerful lens through which city residents can view their city and collectively envision, negotiate and articulate alternatives to present conditions. Urban inhabitants tend to be placed in passive roles as consumers rather than active citizens, framing the politics of the city as concerned with developing capitalist accumulation rather than human potential. Imagination is socially placed within the domains of non-authority such as the childish, placing the loci of authority in the marketplace, the state or the university – places that deal with the 'real' world. Seeing materiality as performance is an attempt to subvert this distinction between the 'real' and the imaginary by refusing to accept what is presented to us as given. The example of the socially engaged artistic project, Montopia, will be used to illustrate how 'materiality as performance' can be applied as a method that offers a way of stepping back from the real without losing sight of it and hence imagining alternatives that are rooted in, but not limited to, the present. The two parts of this paper are in dialogue with each other, elucidating how materiality is destabilized through practice and representation.

Part I: The workshop – inventing meaning through practice

I think that, if we think about a city, in fact everything is possible. We can do anything in the city in fact, and the workshop proves it. So, even if the objects are not realistic, it shows that you can have imagination for the city.

(Participant, Montopia)

In Monthey, a city of approximately 17,000 inhabitants located in the Swiss Alps, I carried out the socially engaged artistic project *Montopia* (September 1st – 7th, 2014) with my artistic collective, zURBS [1]. Over the course of one week politicians,

school children, elderly, unemployed, young professionals, parents and students took parts in workshops where they collectively created a model of Montopia – the Monthey of their dreams and desires. Montopia was built out of objects that the participants had found in the city: a fountain made out of a snail shell and a green glass bottle, a beer-can tree, a climbing gym made out of a mushroom, a cone temple, a glass tower of witches made out of an apple and a brown glass bottle, an interactive opinion sculpture made out of a take-away coffee cup, a media library ('mediatheque') made out plastic bottles taped together with wood and flowers, a hotel made out of an orange and white traffic cone, an energy station made out of a pine cone, flying public transport made out of a brown leaf and a taped-together piece of wood, and so on.

The fact that the objects were everyday artefacts collected from the streets of Monthey was important in order to ensure a direct link from the imaginative city of Montopia to the present city of Monthey, but also in order to point to the transformative potential of both the objects and the city. This transformative potential of materiality is at the core of the notion 'materiality as performance' around which this paper will revolve. By scrutinizing the process of creating Montopia, I will illustrate what 'materiality as performance' means and how it can be used as an approach to open up alternative understandings of urban space.

As the theatre director Anne Bogart points out,

when we know what a door is and what it can do, we limit both ourselves and the possibilities of the door. When we are open to its size and texture and shape, a door can become anything and everything (Bogart & Landau 2005: 59).

This transformation of everyday objects is constantly enacted in our engagement with the materiality around us, for example when a coat hanger is used to keep the window open, or a bottle cap is used as an ashtray, or an arrangement of cardboard boxes, strings and chairs in a parking spot is used in order to signal 'don't park your car here'. Within this context, the affordances of the object, meaning the potentialities held by an object for a particular set of actions (Gibson 1979, cited in Knappet 2004: 44), derive from essentially social practices and are not solely accessible from its physical form. The sociality of materiality is here made explicit: objects can be seen

as 'crystallizations' of human activities, inviting us to use them in certain ways, even if this use does not correspond to their intended function. Accordingly, the city of Montopia was to be seen not as some kind of fantasy of the perfect city completely detached from reality and thus simply as an escape from Monthey. Rather, Montopia was to be seen as a practical tool and powerful lens through which the participants of the workshops could view their city, in order to challenge taken-for granted and homogeneous conceptions of urban and public space. Deutsche (1996: 276) points to how urban public space is turned into an organic unity that instigates the idea of a natural owner (a park belongs to families with children and not to homeless people who disrupt the harmony):

[u]rban public spaces are endowed with substantive sources of unity. Particular uses of space are deemed self-evident and uniformly beneficial because they are said to be based on some absolute foundation – eternal human needs, the organic configuration and evolution of cities, inevitable technological progress, natural social arrangements, or objective moral values. Second it is claimed that the foundation authorizes the exercise of state power in these spaces.

In this scenario, users of a space attach certain 'schemes of perception' to spatial structures, determining what is good, just and appropriate (Cresswell 1996: 16). This way, places become active forces in defining appropriate practice and thus also determining the functional fixity of objects and buildings: a bench is for sitting, not sleeping, on; a train station is for people on the move, not for people staying to seek shelter, and so on. As a result, urban spaces are hardly accessible to all urban inhabitants. Through multiple legal, physical, or symbolic means public space permits access by certain social groups for selected purposes while excluding others. Hence, urban space is increasingly homogenized. This tendency points to the need to open up alternative positions from which to experience, think about and live in cities. 'Materiality as performance' as a dialectical approach that attempts to make explicit the reciprocal relation between our material and mental worlds is here put to the fore.

In geography, the material constitution of the geographical imagination has been a hot topic ever since new 'technologies of image-making [have] raise[d] questions of the location and constitution of the imagination beyond its traditional place in the human mind [...] to a place out there in the world' (Daniels 2011: 185). This debate is often oriented around the so-called 'new materialism' that is concerned with how

materiality accommodates the affective, the habitual, the technological, the excessive and the processual – in other words, the more-than representational (Latham & McCormack 2004; Lorimer 2013; Thrift 2008). In this regard scholars tend to advocate an exploration of performative engagements with ‘landscapes on the ground’ (Daniels 2011: 185), and hence, turn the attention away from the previous so-called ‘obsession with representationalism’ in geography¹ [note]2 that was seen as rendering inert the liveliness of things (Rose 2002; Wylie 2002a; Wylie 2002b). This move from representation to practice seems to be symptomatic for much current debate on materiality in geography. The focus here tends to be on what representation cannot encompass, promoting an abstract theorizing of the non-representable, rather than making an effort to understand and communicate the relation between the two. A similar discussion can be found in performance studies in relation to privileging ephemerality as the constitutive trait of performance, seeing it as an event that disappears in the act of materializing (see for example Taylor 2007). As performance scholar Peggy Phelan points out, performance cannot be ‘saved, recorded or documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations’ (Phelan 1993: 146). The association of performance with loss and disappearance resonates with how performance is applied within geography. Drawing on Phelan, Nigel Thrift opposes performance and representation, claiming that performance conjures up the precarious ‘emptiness of the now’ (Thrift 2008: 135). Accordingly, as Catherine Nash (2000: 657) points out, ‘[t]hat which cannot be spoken or written becomes a new uncharted realm. The challenge is not to chart it but to find ways of writing about its unchartability’. Hence, the current focus on performance risks offering more guidance for considering practices over representations rather than binding the two together.

This risk is clearly illustrated in the Montopia workshops: seen through a lens that favoured practices over representations, the workshops, dealing with images and representations of the imaginary city of Montopia, would have little or no significance for or relation to the *real* Monthey. Montopia, then, could easily be written off as a mere fantasy. After observing a workshop, one of the local urban planners of Monthey indeed critiqued the workshops for having nothing to do with ‘reality’:

My second job is director of the bank here, and I am always on something really, really real. (...) For me [the workshop] is a little bit too much utopia. For me. Because I am so... I need to touch something, I cannot do with virtual things (...) I can't have the vision of the castle made out of an eggs carton or something like this - it is not possible for me.

In creating this dichotomy between utopia (Montopia) and 'reality' (Monthey), the urban planner resorted to an argument outside argumentation – a city is a city – and so decreeing in advance which approaches to urban space are legitimate. For him, the transformation of Monthey into Montopia could not be effected by 'magic', but by labour. Furthermore, he did not find it productive to domesticate a city with fantasy, rather than carpenters, architects and cleaning personnel – those workers who 'really' are a city's causality. By constantly referring to the *real* Monthey vs. the *unreal* Montopia, the urban planner was adopting a classical realist approach, treating the image of the city (Montopia) as a mere reflection or distortion of the 'real' city (Monthey). This perspective places the loci of authority in concrete material domains such as the bank – places that deal with the 'real' world. To uphold this perspective, it is necessary that fantasy, exaggeration and fictiveness are socially placed within the immaterial domains of anti- and non-authority: the childish, the feminine, the mad for example. The material is here seen as tangible or graspable objects defined against a category of events and processes that lack 'concreteness'. This rigid distinction between the material and the immaterial fails to take into consideration how our collective imaginations concerning how we think about and inhabit cities are both shaped by and materialized in spatial forms.

An understanding of 'materiality as performance' attempts to blur this rigid distinction by foregrounding how social processes are bound up with considerations of the constraints of the material qualities of space. As David Harvey (2000) points out, we cannot pretend that we are not embedded and limited by the institutional worlds and built environments we have already created. This perspective emphasises that life in urban space is not something that is solely practised in a performative way, as for example suggested by Michel de Certeau's 'The Practice of Everyday life' (1984). De Certeau's attention tends to be directed to an engagement with space that is solely oriented around immaterial and human-centred action. In contrast, materiality as performance opens up the potential to bind human-centred action and materiality together in a dialectical relationship that sees materiality as inherently performative.

This relationship is reflected in the urban environment that surrounds us. Mike Pearson (2010), for example, points to how marks of physical contact with urban space address aspects of experience that are non-discursive, inarticulate and otherwise unconstituted practices - attesting both to our presence as well as our absence: graffiti, footprints, handrails rubbed naked of paint, stains, dropped groceries, vomited kebab etc. These marks require a revision of the understanding of embodied practices as involving not only the ephemeral and immaterial process of affect, sensations and 'touchy-feely-look-see' (Crang 2003: 494), but also the material embodied practices which *remains* in the materiality of urban space (Schneider 2011). As the Belgian research-architect group Rotor (Boniver et al. 2010) points out, these remains have social implications because they enable people to associate themselves with the collective practice of preceding users showing confidence in the traces they leave behind. For example, people practice complicity in infringement when sticking a piece of chewing gum onto a spot littered with other pieces of gum. Similarly, in contexts where an action can be risky, wear or signs of acts which are repeated and therefore in principle 'successful', will guide whoever subsequently encounters the same problem, for example, the gradually forming of a path through a terrain that is difficult to traverse, or the double door where the one handle that is polished from use indicates that this is the side that will open. Materiality can here be seen as performance in terms of being 'a contingent stability that is constructed through repetition and exists in comprehensible form only within a discursive nexus that gives it meaning' (Lin 2012: 7). The notion of performance is here closely linked to the idea of potentiality and transformation, emphasized by an aesthetic where the world is in the making. Performance can be seen to destabilize materiality in terms of making explicit the (social) processes in which (the meaning of) materiality is constantly invented.

In one *Montopia* workshop, for example, the top of a green glass bottle that was broken, was initially collected for its beautiful material and sensory qualities: despite the broken glass the green circle around the bottle neck was still intact. The glass had lost its initial shine, but was now beautifully blurry and semi see-through, according to its finder. In the facilitated participant discussions during the workshop the bottle was seen as a reflection of Monthey due to its harmony (the circle), but also its sharp character (the broken glass). It was discussed as a symbol of green

space due to its green and organic form, relating to the apparent lack of green spaces in Monthey. For some, it pointed to the dangerous conflict between humans and nature (sharp glass), or the privatisation of water (due to its function to contain water). Finally all these understandings of the bottle top, crystallized in the making of an arts pavilion for Montopia. A pavilion that would function as a green, open and chaotic space for ideas that would help people feel alive. By enhancing an understanding of 'materiality as performance', the workshops here directed our attention to thinking materiality as a process – that is, something to be produced, or always becoming or emerging - rather than as a fixed entity. The aim here is not necessarily to see new things, but to see things anew: 'to make the act of perception performative rather than merely constative' (Sheringham 2006: 82). Accordingly, the Montopian models were created by transforming the context, and not the structure, of the objects. In other words, Montopia was created as a miniature city - as another world – allowing the bottle to become an arts pavilion, the traffic cone to become a hotel and the mushroom to become a climbing gym. This transformation could not take place without the eye performing certain operations, manipulating and attending to the physical world in ways that test the relation between materiality and meaning (Stewart 1993). Touch also plays an important part in this regard.

Touch can here be seen as an attempt to evoke or approach the experience of multiple sensations rather than putting forth definitive statements (see for example Mileaf 2010). The ability to apprehend the 'thingness' of objects in terms of their material qualities and their potentialities for manual apprehension as well as transformation is here put to the fore. In an urban realm of new, perpetually replaced, classified, pristine, smooth, polished, shiny and glossy commodities, sustained by new objects and the desire for perfect materiality, we have problems apprehending this 'thingness' of objects as we are, as Edensor points out, 'affectively and sensually alienated from the material world' (2007: 226). However, in contrast to the flaneur who goes by the ethos of 'look, but don't touch', the workshop participants took on roles that can be compared to that of ragpickers. As Walter Benjamin points out (1999: 368), the ragpicker transgresses the boundaries of pure observation and come into actual contact with the objects of her attention, and this way marks her circulation through the city through her direct contact with things. This focus on tactility seeks to merge vision and touch, allowing the self to become enmeshed with

its object of study (Mileaf 2010). This way of 'seeing', relates to 'the haptic' as an umbrella term that is concerned with the body's sense of itself as body: its movements and its position within space (see e.g. Garrington 2013). The haptic sense may counter what Carmen Dell'Aversano (2008) observes as the totalitarian hegemony of mimetic realism that has come to permeate our sense of reality; ontologically, mimetic realism tells us that whatever exists is constrained by a set of absolute laws, and representationally it tells us that whatever is represented according to its rules and canons really exists. Seeing is believing. Accordingly, reality is seen as a given, natural and familiar environment.

The haptic sense, on the other hand, may undermine this totalizing perspective by opening up a space for unexpected contacts and associations to be made, and unanticipated coincidences and links to be found (see e.g. McTige 2013). It instantiates the idea that things cannot be understood as fixed and independent of people, that there is no pre-given meaning of an object, and there is no one true and real city lurking behind representations and independent of subjects. Hence, even though the stories told about Montopia took on fantastic features and fabulous events, the stories expressed social and political criticisms relating to present day Monthey. For example, the story concerning 'The Glass Tower of Witches' which, as described by the participants, takes positive energy from above and distributes it around the city, deleting the arrogance that exists in people's heads and making wishes come true, was made as homage to a glass factory that used to be located in Monthey in the 80ies. The participants, belonging to the organisation for people with psychological problems, emphasised the openness of the factory and the many workplaces it had created. Hence, the homage can be seen as reflecting nostalgia over manual workspaces being lost, pressing home a sense that something is missing from current conditions that should be the base for social and political struggle and demands. Another example is the construction of a Bob Marley sculpture by a teenage boy whose school class was participating in the workshop. The boy initially seemed completely disinterested in taking part, as he 'did not have any opinions'. When time came to start making the models, however, he livened up and made a great effort of making a statue out of an empty coke bottle. At the end of the workshop, when all participants were standing around the map and we were discussing each model, I asked him about the model. He jokingly said that this was a

sculpture of Bob Marley – a weed smoker -, and then laughed, showing off his indifferent attitude to his schoolmates. When I asked him why it was important for him to have a statue of Bob Marley in Montopia, he first raised his shoulders as if to say that he did not have any opinions on that matter. However, as I insisted on a reply, he slowly started to talk about how Montopia needs music and places for youth to hang out. After encouragement from his classmates, who applauded his suggestion, he explained that there are not many ‘free spaces’ in Monthey where he and his friends could play music and hang out, without being told to go elsewhere by authorities. It was as if the boy realized, as he was speaking and engaging with the model, that he actually did have an opinion about his city and a desire to change it. The Bob Marley sculpture, then, was turned into the manifestation of a youth culture demanding their rights to the city.

From the perspective of practice, then, facilitating an understanding of materiality as performance foregrounds the transformative potential of materiality, and thus the distinction becomes blurred between Monthey and Montopia, the real and the imagined, practice and representation.

Paper II: The exhibition – inventing meaning through representation

Did you know, yesterday, one of the photographers came and he liked [the exhibition] very much and took a lot of pictures and he said: Yeah, I like it very much, but do you know what would be great? If we could take one of these buildings and actually make it! With real materials, with things we can touch!

(Participant, Montopia)

In the city of Monthey, zURBS made the exhibition *Montopia* (September 5th – 7th, 2014), presenting the outcomes of the workshops with the same name. Over the course of three days politicians, school children, elderly, unemployed, young professionals, parents and students, and any other interested, could visit the model of Montopia – the Monthey of their dreams and desires. Apart from the physical model in which buildings and places were made out of various objects, the exhibition consisted of a series of collages in which each object-building was photoshopped by the zURBS team into present-day Monthey. The bottle fountain was placed on a roof

terrace in-between two housing blocks, the beer-can tree stretched its branches out next to the local green house, the interactive coffee-cup-sculpture filled one of the places in an empty parking lot, the Bob Marley sculpture marked a hang-out spot close to the school, the glass tower of witches cast its shadow on the big mall close to the city centre and so on. Each collage was accompanied by a description of the building, based on the stories the participants had told during the workshops. The set-up of the exhibition mimicked that of the architectural presentation where architectural and urban plans are presented to the public through visual renderings, written specifications, miniature models and technical details. However, the exhibition did not aim to merely reflect or represent a glossy image in order to 'sell' the idea of Montopia. Rather, it was intervening in the conditions of the city's existence by turning the internal logic of the architectural presentation on its head.

The fact that the exhibition appropriated the domain of authority of architectural presentations was important in order to undermine the discourse of 'reality' as a dominant and universally shared construction that does not acknowledge its own constructedness. By usurping this discourse of 'reality', the exhibition transcended the real-unreal dichotomy. This transcendence is at the core of the notion of 'materiality as performance', around which this paper revolves. By scrutinizing the exhibition of Montopia, I will illustrate how 'materiality as performance' facilitates efforts to tap into the ubiquitous aspects of representative politics; people and things are not invested in meaning without representation.

As the architect Jeremy Till points out (1994), the way that we conceive of and eventually make our cities, and the buildings that constitute them, is to a large extent determined by the way that we represent them. The standard method of architectural production and representation is enthralled by the classical model – stable, unified and ordered within a coherent and rational system. The architectural project here proceeds in a steady manner from the scale of the city, through the scale of the building and finally to the scale of the architectural detail. At each of these stages, particular issues are investigated and kept within the exclusive territory of the relevant scale. In this linear process the city at a large scale tends to be privileged as decisions made at an early stage determine what follows. Eventually, Till argues, the city is reduced to a series of codes that are reductive and exclusive: the scale

excludes the realm of the body, the graphic excludes the social and political, and the rational method and representation exclude the imaginative, the suppressed and the irrational. As a result, the city, as this form of master plan, is not seen as a heterogeneous space of inhabitable difference, but as a system that is there to be controlled.

'Materiality as performance' as a dialectical approach that attempts to make explicit the reciprocal relation between our material and imagined worlds, suggests an opposite trajectory. Rather than treating representation as a fact or thing relating to a rational whole, representation is here seen as 'event' or constitutive activity that involves offering constructions or images. Hence, 'materiality as performance' attends to the performative and aesthetic aspects of representation. It is important to note here that this understanding of representation does not at all deny the social and political interests, ideologies and other attachments that condition the terms in which the representation is made. Rather, it maintains that such material realities are constituted through practices of meaning-making. Accordingly, representation is always tenuous and unstable. The *Montopia* exhibition tried to make this inherent instability explicit by countering the idea that representation may offer a stable, transcendent view of an enclosed rational and technical whole.

In the photo collages, for example, the objects that featured as miniature buildings in the physical model of Montopia were magnified to disconcerting effects: the traffic cone looks tall as a mountain, a flower covers the whole roof of a building block, a glass bottle is the size of a house, a feather takes the shape of a huge sail, a pine cone is twice as big as the excavator in front of it, and so on. Accordingly, the collages were portraying in a painstakingly lifelike fashion buildings and places that do not belong to our shared perception of external reality, so as to convey the experience of an alternative world that is at the same time dreamlike and absolutely real. The juxtaposition between the two states of dream and reality aimed to create what Clifford calls 'the order of an unfinished collage rather than that of a unified organism' (cited in Pinder 2005: 120).

Furthermore, the representation of the gigantic objects in the photo collages was juxtaposed by the physical presence of the model of Montopia with the objects in

their original size. By incorporating these everyday found objects as part of the model, the traditional view of the city-model as a self-contained ideal world mirroring the real world beyond it was significantly undermined. Hence, the model rather offered itself as a stage on which viewers could project a series of actions, suggesting use, implementation and contextualization. Whereas the objects in the collages were gigantic, giving the impression they could envelope and surround us, the objects in the model could be held within our hand, encouraging us to deal with materiality on an intimate level: the audience could investigate the tactile qualities of the objects (Heavy? Light? Smooth? Sticky?) and share personal associations relating to them (Why did they want this object in Montopia? How does the object relate to Montopia? What personal memories connect to the object?). The collages attempted to make the personal projections of Montopia into presentations of lived possibilities, but in doing so presented a physical world of disorder and disproportion. The physical model of Montopia and the photo collages, then, mutually defined and delimited each other.

Parallels can be drawn to the surrealist montage technique, in which juxtaposition is used to disturb and defamiliarize any notion of wholeness and unity. 'Materiality as performance' hence, relates to this surrealist approach in terms of experimenting with forms for representing the everyday and hence inventing strategies for propitiating the revelation of what is virtual yet inaccessible. Although surrealism has been criticized for escaping the everyday (see for example Read 1993), I would argue that surrealism indeed rather focused on seeing things anew. Similar to the materiality as performance approach, surrealism has no need for invention, the surreal is already there in urban space: in the whining streets, buzzing kiosks, threatening cars, fake lights and screaming doors. The focus then, is not on inventing new systems of representation, but rather on reconceptualizing the very things that are most familiar. Within this focus, the exhibition as representation is seen as a performative event that works to destabilize materiality. This is done by the juxtapositions between the collages and the model rendering intelligible the transformation of a traffic cone into a hotel, a bottle into a fountain and so on. As an example of 'materiality as performance', then, this process lets the semiotic and experiential processes through which meanings is produced, come readily into view and in this way, expands our view of materiality: it reveals the dialectical relation between practice and

representation by elucidating how representations are inseparable from the broader social practices that authorize their existence. In the context of the exhibition the traffic cone was authorized as a miniature high-rise hotel, whereas a traffic cone in the middle of the road is a marker to direct traffic. Hence, by breaking habits of mind and experimenting with forms of representing the materiality of our everyday, the exhibition suggested the possibility of another miraculous world based on radically different principles of classification and order.

From the perspective of representation, then, facilitating an understanding of materiality as performance foregrounds the performativity of representation, and thus the distinction becomes blurred between Monthey and Montopia, the real and the imagined, practice and representation.

Notes

[1] zURBS is an urban research and art collective, working with a participatory approach in which a wide range of participants are invited to take part in workshops, exhibitions, model-making, treasure hunts, games, seminars, expeditions and walks in order to experiment with different approaches to how we can re-imagine the urban through imaginative and creative processes that question what urban space means and is. zURBS is a collaboration between Sabeth Todtli, Cecilie Sachs Olsen, Nina Lund Westerdahl.

[2] This 'obsession' was critiqued for framing the social as a finished and accomplished set of social relations (e.g. capitalism, gender, class) that went around constructing things. This was seen as problematic as society should not be seen as a *thing* that was simply there ready to construct things, but rather as a process -if it could be seen as present at all (see for example Latour 2005).

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