

In *Irena Lagator Pejovic: The Society of Unlimited Responsibility. Art as Social Strategy*. 2001-2011. Edited by Christa Steinle, Karin Buol-Wischenau, Neue Galerie Graz am Universalmuseum Joanneum. Published by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln.

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Art as Architecture in the work of Irena Lagator

What is the difference between contemporary art and contemporary architecture? Are there similarities or areas of correlation between architects and artists? Increasingly today, the work of architects as well as artists is broad, heterogeneous and fragmented. For instance, a recent statistical survey found that only five percent of architects who are awarded their professional degrees actually engage in the design and production of buildings as an occupational pursuit. Clearly, it is no longer only “buildings” that stand as the intrinsic medium of architecture, separating the architectural practice from the rest of the arts. Nor are art and architecture still seen as equal parts of a greater utopian synthesis in their vision of modernization of everyday life as was promulgated, for instance, by the Arts & Crafts or the Bauhaus movements.

Actually, the processes of production of a constructed environment (an economic, legal, political process) have become increasingly disconnected from the traditionally conceived role and knowledge of architecture as a profession. To a large extent, our contemporary environments do not require the presence or the tools of architects, or artists, either, for that matter, in order to be created. In such a situation, a considerable amount of contemporary architecture and art have displayed a kind of convergence – coming closer and overlapping in their interests. They share the medium of “space”, but next to the physical, constructed space, the “spaces” of architecture and art also offer some of the many spatial paradigms including social space, economic space, public space, collective space, mental space and virtual space – as in the production of contemporary “spaces” as described in the mid-1970s by Henry Lefebvre.

If both contemporary artists and architects operate within this multiplicity of contemporary “spaces”, how can the differences between them be clearly delineated? Possible distinctions could still be found, for instance, along the lines of the contrary role within society of a contemporary artist and an architect. Moritz Kung, a Swiss architectural curator, has asserted that a central difference between the role of an architect and that of an artist consists in the fact that architect still works in a heteronymous field and not in an autonomous role that would be characteristic of the involvement of an artist. Accordingly, architects constantly try to construct frames of reference within which they can operate and from which their work emanates. This position logically results in architecture with a weak identity – architecture

that appropriates theories or languages from others - architecture that converts itself into a strategy.

This definition clearly applies to a lot of contemporary architecture, especially in its commercial mainstream, but it also excludes a lot. Much contemporary architecture-displays the qualities of an autonomous practice in which concepts (such as spatial syntaxes and typologies) are expressed and developed from one project into the next.

The Chinese artist-architect Ai Wei Wei proposed another possible distinction between contemporary artists and architects by drawing into focus the “matter of concern” or the object of the practice. He observed that any spatial practice is like a scale or a range of possible routes positioned between two extremes – a “concept” on one side and a “detail” on the other. Or we could say between a “pure language” and a “pure material space”. In his view, artistic attention tends to gravitate to either of the two extremes - to become either a “conceptual work” or, for instance, a “sculpture”. Architectural practice, by contrast, usually dwells somewhere in the mid range, never being able to focus attention fully on either extreme.

This particular distinction between art and architecture works only if “architecture” is seen as a utilitarian discipline in which “concepts” or “forms” are always and inevitably polluted through the negotiation of an architectural object – its use, value and compliance with various social codes. But is there then no architecture able to stand outside of these limitations? I would maintain that there is. It is architecture that starts from its autonomous premises, like art, and from this position constructs both its internal and external relations. This is architecture that can, at the same time, be “in the world” and “about the world”.

Through the subject or medium of “space”, much contemporary art and architecture are closely linked, even inseparable. Even at first glance, there are countless “architects” among “artists” – starting with those who literally build, from the aforementioned Ai Wei Wei or Dan Graham to, for instance, Gregor Schneider with his architectural explorations of the psychological dimensions of space in works such as *House UR*, or Olafur Eliasson who reveals *what we cannot normally see* in spatial experiments linking natural phenomena, perception and built space. Hans Schabus is an artist exploring the symbolic in built space, while Thomas Demand, in his models and photographs, explores architectural space of the everyday and its representation. Yona Friedman’s works linger between art and architecture, between conceived and attainable space.

I would assert that much of the artistic work of Irena Lagator Pejović, largely concerned with space, is in a similar way architecture. The following text is an attempt to disclose “architectural” lines of thinking in her work.

The first line of correlation between interests and methods deployed by Irena Lagator Pejović, with themes brought into focus by contemporary architectural practices, can be found in their similar relation to the broad notion of urban space. Views concerning the

“urban” had undergone a paradigmatic shift around the mid ‘60s; a period commonly considered a point of transference from modern to post-modern organization of society. Within the modernist perception, “urban space” was conceived as a willful collective construct governed by a demand for unity, homogeneity, equality. The position of architects, planners, designers and other spatial practitioners was often seen as equivalent in their contribution to modern urban development. Architects and artists were placed in the role of visionary creators of new social and spatial forms of the modern. But the mid ‘60s were the time when the last architectural manifestos were written, precisely coinciding with exponential growth of urbanization worldwide. The fundamentally modern perception that urban space can be governed by collective will and action had increasingly given way to a perception of urban reality and urban space as complex, fluid, diversified, fragmented and ungovernable. Starting from Venturi and Scott-Brown’s discovery of “sign” and contemporary vernacular architecture on the Las Vegas strip, to Dan Graham’s exploration of suburban sprawl and its social and spatial codes, architects as well as artists have increasingly adopted the role of observers or commentators rather than creators of contemporary urban space – a role involving interpreting and describing the reality of the “city as found” after-the-fact of its creation.

The techniques used today to observe and comprehend contemporary urban space and the dynamics of change behind it are largely accumulated within the broad scope of “urban research” as a discipline in which the pursuits of architects and artists overlap. Architects and artists today marvel at the phenomena of inexorable complexities and fragmentation of our urban world. These range from the spontaneous *shantytowns* and *bidonvilles* of Africa and the *favelas* of South American metropolises where millions construct their existence from drastically limited resources and through internally formed social rules and networks, via enclaves of global capital and corporate influence such as gated communities and economic free zones, to contemporary urban territories fragmented by migrations, borders and conflicts.

The themes and questions arising from the work of architects and artists accumulated within this scope of interest with the nature of our urbanized world are multiple to the point of unaccountability. Various languages and media are deployed, ranging from those pertaining to scientific objectivity to those revealing larger social, political and spatial patterns through micro narratives and intimate observations of the everyday life of individuals. To illustrate this tentative hypothesis of a shared history of art and architecture in observing the world “as found” since the ‘60s, we can, for example, mention artists such as Sophie Calle who, in her work called “*The Detachment*”, explored the relationship of history and urban memories of citizens of Berlin after 1989. Then there are the works of photographers trying to capture the essence of contemporary urban space, such as Andreas Gursky and Bas Princen or artists revealing patterns of power, domination or exclusion in contemporary urban space as present in works of Marijetica Potrč, Nasrin Tabatabai, Wendelien van Oldenborgh and others.

In this sense, one trend in the work of Irena Lagator Pejović can be singled out as observation and commentary on the nature of contemporary urban space. In her case, it is the sharply transforming urban reality in the context of post-socialist transition in the

Balkans as exemplified in the immediate environments of Podgorica, Cetinje or Belgrade. In this line of investigation, we encounter works such as *After Memory*, *Next*, *Limited Responsibility Society* and *Witness of Time – Now*. While these works utilize diverse media in their execution (a book, a series of photographs, an installation, a newspaper), they are at the same time also “maps” – precise “cartographic” investigations into social, political and economic movements taking place within tangible geographic and temporal frames. What is particularly interesting and compelling in this group of works is that Irena Lagator Pejović succeeds in shifting attention from the abstract nature of political, economic and social transformations toward an individual, as their principal agent and protagonist.

In *After Memory*, *Limited Responsibility Society* and *Next*, for example, not only are we confronted with the “space” of post socialist transition and its accompanying phenomena – hyperinflation, territorial fragmentation, migration of symbols from one value register to another. We are pointedly focused on our own individual presence within those processes – the odor and texture of banknotes passing through our hands, the digital registration of our purchases, the airplane cushion on which we rest our head. In this society of individuals, as portrayed by Lagator, the countless persons whose immediate actions are registered within the works, the numerous viewers of the works, the artist herself, are not given different positions. On the contrary, they belong to one and the same fragmented “we” of our society.

Can we thus claim – going back to the starting point of this part of our inquiry – that we can act only as “observers” and “commentators” of an ever more complex urban reality that surrounds us? What is the actual measure of our mundane, repetitive gestures – a sale, a purchase or a vote, or a moment of remembering or forgetting – in the creation of urban space that surrounds us? Does this kind of mundane contribution to the world stand outside or independent of what we can or could collectively and willfully create? Is our perception that we can only observe, describe or map the complexities and contradictions of the changing world correct? Those might be the key questions implied by the work of Irena Lagator Pejović for artists and architects in the way they currently address urban space.

Thus, if this first line of work by Lagator connotes a certain recognition of a professional crisis for art and architecture by pointing to their more passive, observational role vis-à-vis urban conditions in which they operate, in the second line of her work the artist attempts to construct and thus to propose an idea of space – both social and phenomenological – that we inhabit. Many architects and artists also build today. The common denominators behind the totality of their contribution to the built world would be rather difficult if not impossible to identify. Rather, builders of today explore different and often mutually independent routes. Some invest in furthering the formal languages or utopian thoughts of the past; others are committed to materializing (leisure or commercial) utopias of the present. In the current vacuum of spatial paradigms, for artists and architects the relationship to the built space doesn’t arise from a set of shared values or concepts created within the social sphere of the discipline, but rather from highly autonomous explorations that differ from practice to practice and from one cluster of architectural intelligence to another.

Within this fragmented field of architectural investigation, the work of Irena Lagator Pejović likewise occupies a highly autonomous and genuinely noteworthy position. At first glance, her string installations such as *What We Call Real*, *Please Wait Here*, *Own Space*, *Living Space*, or *Living Room* are undoubtedly works of architecture. They are governed by a precisely conceived and strictly controlled spatial vocabulary. They are placed within existing spatial frames of galleries or museums, but those existing spaces dematerialize as the new reality constructed by the artist settles in. Most of her artistic energy is invested in the reduction of the means through which the space is defined, comparable to the site-specific installations of Daniel Buren. This effort leads to a spatial language that doesn't immediately reveal references or relations to any other piece of contemporary art or architecture. These spaces are specific; they refer only to themselves and to their creator. And yet, surprisingly, these spaces are deeply familiar to everyone who visits them. Their material – string – is recognizable as the very fiber that clearly and subtly defines all space – as it would be a ray of light, a vocal cord, a line on paper, a trace of intention, a shadowy recollection of a space once experienced or imagined. The titles of these works also suggest spaces with which we are familiar and commonly inhabit: living space, a living room or one's own space. But at this point the strategy of Lagator in constructing the space in which we live and call our own diverges from the one commonly used by architects and reaches toward a more distant horizon. These spaces evoke no usual experiences and need no comfort of known meanings supplied by spaces of our everyday life. We don't recognize them as familiar because of their materials or dimensions or the typical utilitarian objects found inside. They are familiar because our bodies and senses recognize them as such, beyond the everyday living space as socially negotiated and defined. In this respect, the string installations of Irena Lagator Pejović are like a suggestion, a whisper, a strong artistic intuition of space that exists beyond the commonly recognized laws of perception.

What then is this unexplored, uncommon spatial territory where Irena Lagator ventures with her work?

Certainly, even personal, intimate perception of space is to a large extent a product of culture. The space itself, its conception and representation is, going back to Lefebvre, a cultural product specific to a particular context. The twentieth century has brought about a series of revolutions in the understanding of space. From sciences to visual arts to everyday life, conceptions of time and space have been repeatedly and radically reinvented through modern mobility, media and medicine. But, more interestingly, the conceptions of space present in various specialist realms of human knowledge have often developed in parallel or in resonance with each other, even when explicit connections among them are impossible to establish. One of the greatest conceptual revolutions of the twentieth century regarding the notion of space came in 1915 with Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity. For this theory, Einstein was indebted to Bernhard Riemann and Carl Friedrich Gauss, who had found a mathematical apparatus half a century earlier to describe space as potentially n -dimensional, thus no longer a three-dimensional, Euclidian entity. By contrast, Einstein's theory describes space as organic, reactive, curved and warped, distorted by inner gravitational force fields. In 1919 Arthur Stanley Eddington famously confirmed the theory by photographs of a total solar eclipse

showing starlight that “bends”, deflected by gravitational forces. The international media built the reputation of the discovery as, it was felt, the greatest revolution in the history of science. This problem, formulated by Riemann and Gauss in mid-nineteenth century and later shaped by Einstein, remains to date unresolved in physics. The current string theory for the moment lacks any empirical backing, but that might be provided once experiments in the Large Hadron Collider in CERN begin to produce results. If the theory is confirmed, we are bound once again to learn a lot more not only about the laws of physics, but about the very nature of existence and of space.

Simultaneous with the changing conception of space expressed by the general theory of relativity, developments in the visual arts and architecture took a similar route, notably in the work of constructivists. Directly inspired by Einstein, Naum Gabo, Alexandar Rodchenko and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, among others, after 1917 in Moscow and in the 1920s in Bauhaus, developed spatial structures essentially concerned with exploring the weightless and dynamic language of space and with communicating, through art and architecture, the new understanding of the world and the universe.

For European and American avant gardes, the constructivists’ work opened various avenues for experiments in conceptualizing the relationship of modern humanity and the individual to space. This genealogy leads, for example, to works of artists-architects such as Frederick Kiesler, from his *City in Space*, 1925 to *Endless House*, 1950. During the 1960s, kinetic artists such as Gianni Colombo, in his 1967 *Elastic Space* composed of white contracting and expanding strings, attempted to make the individual and the social space tangible. Similarly, the string-and-wire room-sized sculptures by the Venezuelan artist-architect Gertrude Goldschmidt (Gego) from the late 1960s to the ‘80s and recently by Argentinean Tomas Saraceno, appear as a recurrent interest in pushing the frontiers of a makeable and inhabitable space. The artist that possibly comes closest to Lagator’s understanding of space is Fred Sandback, whose yarn, elastic cord and wire sculptures are projected between material and immaterial; a space described by means so minimal that even the visitors experience of such space appears to hold more weight than their delicate physical elements.

In her installations, Lagator thus follows those artist-architects who have explored the limits of understanding and perception of space. Unlike the techno-aesthetic exploration leading back to the constructivists, Lagator’s space composed of simple suspended strings is clearly far removed from exalting the aesthetic potentials of any form of technological rationalism. To the contrary, the string in Lagator’s work attempts to capture and trace a more sensitive “spatial dimension”. Perhaps it is in such a dimension that the material and immaterial aspects of space exactly coincide, where perception folds into intention and where aesthetic fascination with space originates. The qualities of Lagator’s string spaces resonate with our sensibility and cognition almost as if they seek to be known and articulated. Beyond the usual, self-confident architectural assertion that we are fully capable of defining and creating our built environment, these are works that ask how much we know the spaces we call “our own” and how familiar we are with our daily spaces for “living”.