

# THE ARTS: REVEAL, CRITIQUE AND TRANSFORM THE RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS, THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE CITY

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

When first planning to organize a reflection through this special issue and formulating our call for papers, we stated that the arts can reveal, critique, and transform the relationship we have with the environment. If the papers gathered in this issue tend to support this affirmation, they also call for nuance and show that there is more than one way to conceive of the relation between individuals, the environment and the city through artistic expressions. In fact, if our call entailed above all to think about the way artists look at the dissonance they perceive in the (mostly urban) world that surrounds them and about the aesthetic dimension of environmentalism, the authors broadened the spectrum of perspectives and chose varied angles to address the proposed theme.

First, the contributions to the issue incite to reflect on the signification of the idea of "environment" by making reference to several of its meanings. Sometimes related by the authors to the environmentalist or ecologist movement, it refers most of the time to the milieu in which humans evolve. Focusing mostly on its urban dimension, the city/nature opposition is in many cases an underlying element of their reflections. For instance, Koci distinguishes two dimensions of the urban environment: an anthropic one (that is built, human made) and a natural one (constituted of green spaces and landscapes). Salomon Cavin claims that if anti-urban values and ideologies exist, it is always in relation with a better life associated to a contact with nature. Throughout the papers, nature is sometimes hygienist, like the effect of sunlight on human bodies in modernist thought (Siret), sometimes the origin of an elevation of the mind and of psychological wellness (Salomon Cavin, Girard). It can be wild, landscaped, urbanized, according to a range that extends from uninhabited to domesticated (Miaux and Roulez). Girard, relating the two terms differently, cites Restany (1962) who

describes the city as an "industrial nature": an abundance, a profusion, a chaos, an almost infinite resource of materials.

The papers gathered here also highlight the blurry boundaries between the categories of art, artists, urban planning, urban design and thinkers and builders of the city. Can all citizens, as much as recognized artists, undertake artistic practices? Are works of art, once placed in public space, perceived only as art pieces or also as elements of urban design? During Parking Day, groups engaged with urban planning and promoters of a specific vision of the ideal use of public space integrate artistic forms in their ephemeral occupation of parking spots. Its participants relate their actions sometimes to activism, a militant art that can be performed without any artists, and sometimes to tactical urbanism (Douay and Prévot). French rappers, through their lyrics that describe the discomfort of living in *cités HLM*, develop a discourse that comes close to a city project, the description of a better urban environment (Koci). The poster and sound artists presented by Girard extract ordinary urban sounds and materials that become works of art when displaced out of their original context and into spaces like galleries. Their work, driven by a critical attitude towards the modern city and the art world, end up transforming both by their new way of conceiving them. In sum, the papers illustrate that it would be inaccurate to place on one side the thinkers of the arts and on the other the thinkers of the city, the first ones criticizing the others. We divided the papers in two categories: a first that gathers the ones that depict the city as a place for aesthetic experience, an experience that allows to perceive it differently as well as to imagine its future, and a second that presents the case of artistic expressions that are potential vehicles of a discourse on the urban.

### **The city as a place for aesthetic experience**

The first six papers, evoking among other ideas the *flâneur* figure of Benjamin, the practice of space of De Certeau or the Situationists' *dérives*, all present a reinvention of the city through the act of reading it differently. Looking at public art as an official genre, Vernet examines the ways in which it participates to urban and social life through the interactions between the public and two commemorative pieces in Square St-Louis, in Montreal. Douay and Prévot as well as Joncas approach practices that lie somewhere between art and tactical urbanism. The first ones reflect on what Parking Day, which started in the United States and then spread throughout America and Europe, reveals on contemporary urban activism, an activism they end up qualifying as neutered and ambiguous in terms of the urban forms to promote. The movement would rather bring together city dwellers who share a common lifestyle. Joncas argues that the artistic and cultural practices that arise in spaces characterized by an ambiguity of the public or private nature of their juridical status, function and mode of appropriation, represent one among many vectors of their equivocalness. Siret explores the meaning of sunlight in the urban environment. After presenting the originality of Twarowski's helioplastics theory, essentially visual, he proposes a new contemporary urban solar aesthetic that includes the whole body and all its senses. Kazi Tani shows how skateboarding in the city allows for a whole new evaluation of the built environment, hence appreciated for its texture patterns as well as for the arrangement of materials and the aesthetic experience it allows. Finally, Miaux and Roulez aims to seize the city/nature and human/nature relations suggested by various artistic works mobilizing the boardwalk.

### **The arts: a vehicle for a discourse on the urban?**

The last three papers present different art forms and aim to reflect on the critical perspective they carry on the city. Girard looks at the work of poster and *musique concrète* artists who, integrating in their work ordinary materials taken in the city, bring an aesthetic perspective on what was before merely perceived as visual and noise pollution in the modern city. Presenting the paintings of Edward Hopper, a sad and introvert artist, Salomon Cavin questions the assumption which associates his work with the American anti-urban movement. The author argues

that the city was in the end not the painter's problem or subject, and that the anti-urban connotation of his paintings comes from the contemporary mobilization of his work. Finally, Koci examines French rap lyrics to understand their underlying vision of the urban environment – more specifically of the *cités HLM* – and ultimately the formulation of an idea of a better city.

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