

*Judith Laister*

## Acting in Heterotopia Other, Third and Real Spaces in Public Art and Theory

### To swim or not to swim

In the summer of 2003, it almost happened that a utopia was realised in the Austrian City of Graz. Close to the city centre, on an idle, so far inaccessible spot of a trained, hidden brook called Mühlgang, the artists Peter Arlt, Benni Foerster-Baldenius and Wolfgang Grillitsch installed the infrastructure of a small river bath: a wooden catwalk, a shower, partition walls to change clothes, a barbecue grill and a number of floating tires with their typical red and white stripe patterns.

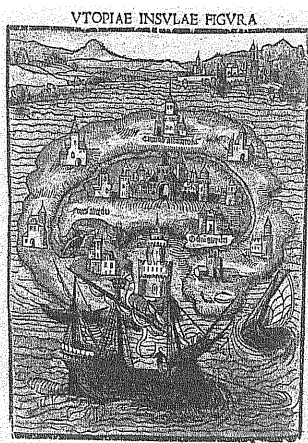


Peter Arlt, Benni Foerster-Baldenius, Wolfgang Grillitsch: "Club of Non-Swimmers", in the frame of "real\*utopia", Graz, 2003. Photo: Judith Laister.

If you wanted to visit the idyllic little green space between the unimposing Roesselmuehl Park, the charming building of a historical post garage and the quietly flowing Mühlgang, you had to become a member of the “Club of Non-Swimmers”. For that purpose you had to pay a modest membership fee. In turn you received an identity card and a pin code which granted you access to the unusual temporary rest area in the heart of Graz – and you had to sign for the most important rule: Swimming forbidden! Where until the 1960s people used to swim, today, bathing is considered too dangerous, above all for hygienic reasons. Furthermore, the usually closed-off area is private property and had to be protected from public access due to insurance issues. Therefore, a professional locking system was mounted on an iron fence which only club members were able to unbolt. The artists responded to the various statutory provisions which came up in the course of the realisation of their initial idea of establishing a public swimming pool on the Mühlgang in an ironic way: The “Club of Non-Swimmers”, a sympathetic, well visited and positively reviewed variation of their original concept, promoted by the slightly nostalgic slogan “Swimming in the brook, yesterday reality, and today utopia”.

#### real\*utopia

Thanks to the official restrictions, a “utopia” in the proper sense of the term coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516, was at least realised to some extent: A quiet, peaceful island, safe, clean, well regulated and protected through clear-cut territorial borders from the outside world. Although it wasn’t passed on if swimming was forbidden in Mores ideal state, the organised insularity



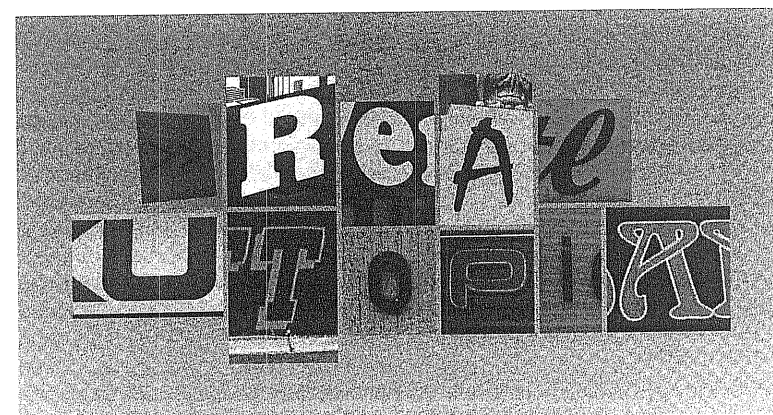
of both territories as well as their distinct allocation of social roles are related with each other.

The physical boundaries defined by fences, locks and a water ditch safeguarded the area from non-members of the “Club of Non-Swimmers”. And the contemporary art system provided the symbolic borders by excluding those people automatically who didn’t possess the cultural capital for playing under the rules of the contemporary art game. According to Pierre Bourdieu’s (1998) theory of “place

Utopia, 1516

effects” which defines the interrelation between the social space and the physical space, it is hardly surprising that the social structure on both sides of the fence was relatively homogeneous: On the club premises lingered artists, students, young academics and interested visitors of Graz, the European Capital 2003, in the frame of which the project took place. And the street-sided and rather unattractive Rösselmühlpark was populated, as always, primarily by socially disadvantaged groups of local residents such as migrants, tramps or elderly people who lived in the immediate neighbourhood, the Graz district of Gries.

“The Gries – This is where Graz becomes international” is the euphemistic description of the district which was coined in the frame of “real\*utopia”, a temporary contemporary art exhibition in the public space of Gries which comprised in total 15 different projects, among others the “Club of Non-Swimmers”. Financed and supported by “Graz 2003 – Cultural Capital of Europe” the association for contemporary art <rotor>, at that time located in Gries as well, invited artists from Austria and various European countries to choose locations in the district Gries and “to create art works between reality and utopia [...] which deal with certain aspects of the district and risk a view into a possible future on several levels.” (<rotor> 2003). In the official promotion material of “real\*utopia” the Gries was described as the most international and diverse district of Graz which is: “notable for its heterogeneity, thus differing from other districts: first-class hotels are located almost next to striptease bars; a Muslim praying centre lies close to the slaughterhouse; in a neighbourhood park, residents of the adjacent old people’s home meet up with youths and people searching for recreation who speak a wide variety of



Logo of the public art project “real\*utopia”, <rotor>, Graz, 2003.

foreign languages; violin études emanating from the music conservatory are over tuned by Balkan turbo-folk music coming from bars and restaurants – a district full of contrasts indeed.” (<rotor> 2003a)

This multicultural image becomes also apparent in the framework programme which was characterized by folkloristic events with an emphasis on cuisine, music and fashion. The staging of cultural diversity ranged from Bulgarian cheese pie to Chinese rice dishes, from African drumming to Styrian jazz, from hair plaiting to henna tattoos. These various events celebrating multiculturalism at low-threshold level do not only contrast the image of contemporary art as distinctive and hardly comprehensible but also the dominant image of the Gries district on the right bank of the river Mur. In stark contrast to the prestigious middle-class districts on the left bank of the river Mur, Gries has been seen as the “other side” of Graz up to now, which has been less valued because of its industrial history, a higher percentage of working-class and migrant inhabitants and a certain disregard for spatial considerations. This contrasty, dynamic social and spatial reality of Gries, or rather its image as contrasty, dynamic and socially and spatially in permanent transition, lays the foundations for the idea of creating “utopias for real places”. In homogenous urban districts with stable social conditions, thus little space for visionary projections concerning the physical environment (Bourdieu 1998), a project like “real\*utopia” would never have happened.

### Acting in heterotopia

The word combination “real\*utopia” is a smartly composed, seductive paradox which worked well as a distinctive title for an art project in the frame of Graz 2003 and drafted a friendly, marketable alternative to the negative image of Gries. But strictly speaking: By definition a utopia can never be real. The Greek-rooted term “utopia”, which was coined by Thomas More as the name of his ideal Renaissance state, is composed of the syllables “ou” and “topos” which mean as much as “non” / “good” and “place”. Thus a “utopia” in the proper meaning of the word is a non-place and at the same time a good place. It derives from strong discontent with contemporary social conditions and expresses the desire for a different world which is governed by humanistic principles and social justice. According to Michel Foucault, “utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces”. Although they have “a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society [...], they present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down.” (Foucault 1967) In contrast to “utopia” as a site with no real place, Foucault creates and defines the term “heterotopia” as physically existing “other space” which is simultaneously unreal and thus a location both real and utopian:

“There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.” (Foucault 1967)

As “other spaces” the French philosopher instances a variety of different locations such as cemeteries, rest homes, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, retirement homes, museums, hotels or gardens – and the ship, as will be elaborated later on. They all represent real places outside of ordinary places, characterized by strong borders, extraordinary processes and mostly indicating social margins and areas of conflict. In this sense, the idea of a public art exhibition in the Graz district Gries which strives for creating “utopias for real places” can be called a heterotopian idea. And foundation and activities of the “Club of Non-Swimmers” turns out to be a significant artistic example of what the title of this essay refers to as “acting in heterotopia”.

### “Other spaces” in theory and public art

Foucault’s text “Other spaces, Heterotopia” is based on a lecture given in March 1967. It was not published until October 1984, under the title “Des espace autres” in the French journal *Architecture / Mouvement / Continuité*. Although not reviewed for publication by the author and thus not part of the official corpus of his work, the manuscript was released into the public domain for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before his death in June 1984. Since then, but primarily since the 1990s, Michel Foucault’s concept of “other spaces” has deeply influenced artistic and architectural discourses dealing with space and spatial practice under changed orders of magnitude in a globalised world. Against the background of new technologies impacting on people’s mobility, communication and public surveillance, Foucault’s dynamic concept of “other spaces” has served as an associative base for challenging traditional, statically-oriented notions of space. Many parts of the text have been quoted extensively and sound like philosophical guiding principles for the emerging digital age:

“We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment. [...] Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of rela-

tions among sites. [...] We do not live in a homogeneous and empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly phantasmatic as well. I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein." (Foucault 1967)

Within the history of science, a concept like "heterotopia" is a typical paradigm of the poststructuralist preference of space to time. By deconstructing historical linearity and "the order of things" elements are juxtaposed and restructured which have not been thought in relation yet. At the same time, Foucault's "other spaces" are just one out of many related postmodern spatial concepts which often refer directly to Foucault's theories. To take a few examples: Michel de Certeau's "Practice of Everyday Life" (1988), first published in 1980, is strongly inspired by Foucault and other poststructuralist theorists who were rethinking space, such as Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard or Jacques Derrida. Although he does not use the term "heterotopia" itself, the tactics and strategies of acting in space in a non linear way which he demonstrates clearly derive from the idea of "other spaces", which can be shown by his interest in ships and prisons, borders and bridges, in-between and non-spaces. When the French ethnologist Marc Augé thought about "Non-Places" (1994) as the new leading concept for an anthropological thinking of space in "supermodern" times, he refers directly to de Certeau's "Practice of Everyday Life". And Ina-Maria Greverus' (2005) concept of "aesthetic places", also inspired by de Certeau's idea of an in-between space, traces ways and means of sensual, creative encounters in the field, and not least between art and anthropology. Finally, postcolonial ideas such as "thirdspace" (Homi K. Bhabha, 1990; Edward W. Soja, 1996) and "contact zone" (Mary Pratt, 1992; James Clifford, 1996) are also linked to a rejection of territorial concepts by advocating a thinking of space in relations, simultaneity, heterogeneity and plurality.

All these different, but interrelating concepts can be subsumed under the theoretical bracket of "third spaces", which are characterised by breaking with one of the main modern principles of a binary separation of a first space containing the empirical, physical, measurable world of objects, from a second space referring to the world of imagination, signs and representations. The rise of third space concepts since the late 1960s and especially since the 1990s – both in scientific and in artistic and architectural contexts – is based on the impact of new communication technologies, changed possibilities for the production and dissemination of images, an increasing mobility, large-scale monitoring systems of public spaces and therefore a fundamental change of scales in our everyday life. According to Marc Augé (1994), just to take a popular example from the discipline of anthropology, the actual world "has not the precise measures of the one we think we inhabit. We live in a world which we have not yet

learned to see. We have to learn again how to think our space." (Augé 1994, 46) Our world society, Augé wrote in "Non Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity", requires an altered understanding of the relation between space, time and identity. People are confronted with changed magnitudes on a global level, an accelerated sequence of events and multiplied coercions (or opportunities) to construct their identity. The "anthropological place" as a stable home for identity, history and relationship constellations is confronted with a growing expansion of "non-places". The local is permeated with imaginations, the emergence of which is not grounded in the here and now but rather in places that are distant, remembered or conveyed through the media. Transience and displacement, loss of identity and the experience of difference, illusionism and complexity characterize the non-place, but also "the possibility of something that resembles freedom". (Augé 1994, 138)

This aspect of the possibility of active change in a newly scaled world – and also the fear to lose it through the dominance of advanced regulatory mechanisms – is the focus of the American urban and environment planner Edward Soja (1996), who coined the mental figure of "thirdspace" in the discursive field of postcolonial studies. In reference to Henri Lefèbvre's trialectical figure of the "production of space" from lived, represented and imagined space, with "thirdspace" Soja specifically rejects territorial concepts of home and space that reproduce uneven power relations. This leads to demands for a "re-mapping" of Eurocentric constructions of space with their clear centre-periphery dichotomies. It is when imaginary spaces, which are not marked on any maps, are made visible that hierarchies and hegemonies are revealed.

A further often discussed third space concept is that of the "contact zone", which was developed in 1992 by the linguist Mary Louise Pratt within the theoretical frame of postcolonial studies. Pratt uses the term "contact zone" to refer to "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today." (Pratt 1992, 7) Despite these apparent hierarchies, Pratt does not focus on powerlessness and dominance, or on the one-way nature of processes of assimilation and acculturation. Instead she defines contact zones as transcultural spaces of interaction, mutual influences and exchanges between different groups. By using the term "contact" she aims "to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. A contact perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other." (Pratt 1992: 7)

James Clifford adopted the concept of the contact zone from Mary Louise

Pratt's "Imperial Eyes" in 1997. He uses the term in his book "Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century", especially in his chapter "Museums as Contact Zones". According to Clifford, "museums and other sites of cultural performance appear not as centres or destinations but rather as contact zones traversed by things and people. This is both a description and a hope, an argument for more diverse participation in a proliferating 'world of museums'." (Clifford 1997: 8) Clifford advocates an extension of those places of cultural contact because, he argues, contact zones – whether as self-organised tribal museums or MOMA in Manhattan – are spaces of possibility for a public negotiation of different cultural values and interests. This contact comprises the potential to support processes of interactive transformation – both on a local and a political level.

The lowest common denominator of these different third space concepts, which are closely related to the emergence of the discourse of postmodernity since the 1960s, is their threshold character. They do not represent a well-regulated field of norms which strive for stability, rather they form spaces between where "something" not yet classified can develop. This creative potential and the tempting openness of "other space" ideas constitutes the decisive interface between postmodern theory and art. Especially artistic fields which deal specifically with spatial questions, such as public art and non-commercial architectural practices, have utilized theoretical third space concepts as comprehensive source of inspiration. The idem theorists such as Foucault, de Certeau, Augé or Clifford are well-known both in art and science, thus supporting mutual exchanges between artists and theorists and making for a third space in-between the scientific and the art field. Against this background, the present anthology "Performing Life – Performed Lives. Aesthetics and Anthropology" also indicates the lasting actuality of "acting in heterotopia", or rather, relating to Ina-Maria Greverus' (2005) "ways towards an aesthetic anthropology", the lasting aspiration for an "aesthetic space" in-between, merging the modern scientific distinction between rationality and creativity.

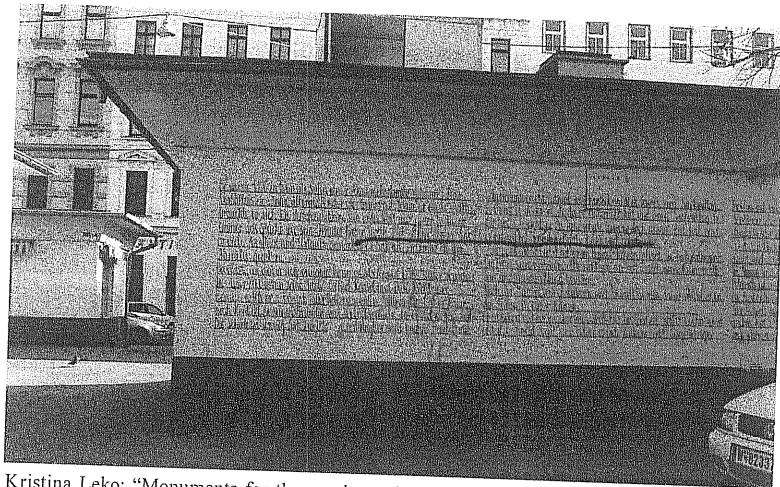
#### Real and other spaces: (Hi)Stories on Site

In recent years, postmodern approaches were increasingly criticised for primarily being useful in the privileged fields of academic and artistic discourses without impacting on – or at least considering – social hierarchies, economic conditions and political power relations. If you take this criticism seriously, a revision of the poststructuralist concepts of "other spaces" and their rise in theoretical and aesthetic contexts is essential too. This revision is of special interest in the case of analysing artistic projects such as "real\*utopia" which aim for intervening in public spaces and social realities

by simultaneously referring to heterotopian concepts. With regard to an increasing number of public art projects aiming for social and spatial impact on site beyond primarily aesthetic or formal interventions, often by means of participatory strategies, a lot of artists are no longer acting within the traditional artistic spaces of studios, galleries and museums to express their concepts in an autonomously claimed art sphere but rather amidst everyday life, where the power of the social space, the actor's possession of economic, social and cultural capital, becomes a crucial part of the work of art. To bring art closer to everyday life and social areas of conflict, artists are increasingly collaborating with local residents of concrete urban districts when they organise activities such as workshops to improve the local urban environment, discuss problems concerning discrimination, assert open spaces, run communication centres, arrange open-air cinemas or raise monuments from the bottom-up.

To allege another example of artistic acting in heterotopia, striving for "real" spatial and social impact on site by partly employing participatory strategies, I would like to analyze the Viennese project "(Hi)Stories on Site. An Exhibition in Public Space around Volkertplatz". The exhibition in the public space took place in the summer of 2006. For six weeks in June and July, a series of art projects aimed at "representing life" in the quarter around Volkertplatz, a market place in Vienna's 2nd district, Leopoldstadt. According to the press releases, "(Hi)Stories on Site" was intended to "establish contacts and relationships with life on the spot". By involving local residents specifically, "(Hi)Stories on Site" addressed both individual, bottom-view stories and the official history of the district (for example the displacement of the Jewish Community during World War II and the different stages of immigration during the past 100 years). The Volkertplatz is located in Vienna's second district, relatively close to the city centre, about five minutes by underground to Stephansplatz, and only five minutes' walk to the Northern Railway station of the City, called Praterstern, which has been regenerated over the last couple of years. Due to its location near the Praterstern traffic junction, which was until World War I the arrival point for thousands of immigrants from the eastern parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the area around Volkertplatz has been a popular area for migrants since the 19th century. Numerically this means that about 40% of the inhabitants are migrants mostly from former Yugoslavia and Turkey, which is a figure which doubles the overall percentage in Vienna. The Volkertviertel is a very densely built up urban zone where 40% of the flats are categorised as "substandard" (in comparison: in the whole of Vienna the rate is 20%).

These and many other statistical data concerning the measurable first space of Volkertviertel, can easily be found on the professional interactive web



Kristina Leko: "Monuments for the good people of Volkertviertel", Vienna, "(Hi)Stories on Site". Photo: Joerg Auzinger

site <http://www.ziel2wien.at/> which is a product of the urban regeneration process which has been going on for about five years. From 2002-2006 the quarter around Volkertplatz was designated an "Objective 2 Area" of the European Union which qualifies it for European structural funds to support the economic and social regeneration of cities and urban neighbourhoods in crisis. "Objective 2" addresses key areas suffering industrial decline, urban deprivation and low economic activity. The rebuilding of the railway station, a remodelling of the market place, the installation of a "Grätzelmanagement" are only a few of the governmental regeneration strategies which have taken place in Volkertviertel in recent years.

The exhibition in public space around Volkertplatz, "(Hi)Stories on site", is just a tiny part of the ongoing activities pushing on the transformation – and also the gentrification – of the Leopoldstadt. The project was financed by the European Union as part of the "Objective 2 Programme", the governmental department "Art in public space" ("Kunst im öffentlichen Raum Wien") and by private sponsors. The consulting company 17&4 provided ideas and organisation, three curators specified the concept and invited certain well-known international artists to submit proposals for a competition, from which ten projects were selected. On the one hand, the call for proposals focused clearly on the relation between the art project and the urban development; on the other, it called unmistakably on the artists to involve the local inhabitants in their artistic contributions, to initiate a process of dialogue

and exchange – one could say a "contact zone" by connecting social actors who would normally not encounter each other.

One example of a total of ten realised art projects is the work of Kristina Leko (\*1966, lives and works in Zagreb and Cologne) which was titled "Monuments for the good people of Volkertviertel" and which the artist herself describes as a "communication project". Like her previous participatory projects she thought carefully about questions of representation, hierarchies, migration, democracy, racism and social exclusion. Together with a group of about twenty twelve to seventeen year old schoolchildren she conceived and conducted biographic, semi-structured interviews with different residents of the district: older and younger people, newcomers and long-established Viennese locals, men and women. After this the working group transformed the recorded data into a written biographic narrative in recognition of the anonymous heroes of everyday life in the neighbourhood. Four of the five biographic stories of actual individuals from the district, presented in large sized handwritten letters giving the impression of an exercise-book, are still visible to everyone on publicly accessible walls in the Volkertviertel. Like the "Club of Non-Swimmers" the process of the project and its remaining unusual public messages can be seen as actual kinds of acting in heterotopia.

### Conclusion

The title "Acting in Heterotopia" was created as a heuristic lens to view on the tendentially paradox situation of public art projects striving for the creation of "other spaces" on real places. In an ontological sense, there is no such thing as "heterotopia" but it is rather a theoretical concept which has influenced and legitimized artistic interventions in public spaces until today. The limits of an effective acting in third spaces, beyond its conceptual and visionary character, becomes obvious as soon as one considers the social, economic and political context of "(Hi)Stories on Site" as well as "real\*utopia". The iron fence separating the premises of the "Club of Non-Swimmers" from the Rösselmühlpark can be seen as a striking symbol: It sharply selected the mobile cultural tourists visiting the Gries district as location of one of the most popular projects of Graz 2003, Cultural Capital of Europe (habitus: by tendency highly educated with an advanced understanding of contemporary art or simply curious about a nice project on an appealing temporarily accessible place) from those living and acting in the proximity day-to-day, who do not possess the social and cultural capital to gain access to the art field. This also goes for the Viennese example; the limited scope of heterotopian artistic activities becomes visible when one confronts

them with questions about the position of the different actors in the social space. Although the project has been in general successfully evaluated due to positive reports in influential Austrian media and also in art magazines, the “(Hi)Stories on Site” were little-known to the local residents beyond the directly involved actors, mostly scholars, subtly disciplined by their teachers to take part in the art project. Furthermore, the financial basis for realising friendly and sensational projects like “real\*utopia” or “(Hi)Stories on Site” is a direct result of the political intent to upgrade the image – and thus the economic value – of the disreputable urban districts Gries and Volkertviertel by (ab)using art as a stimulus for gentrifying areas close to the city centre. And, finally, both projects can only be understood against the backdrop of a euphemistic comprehension of multi-culturality, which celebrates cultural diversity in a folklorist sense without clearly pointing out social injustice, racism and the influences of neoliberal processes on marginalized urban districts and the precarious situation of their inhabitants.

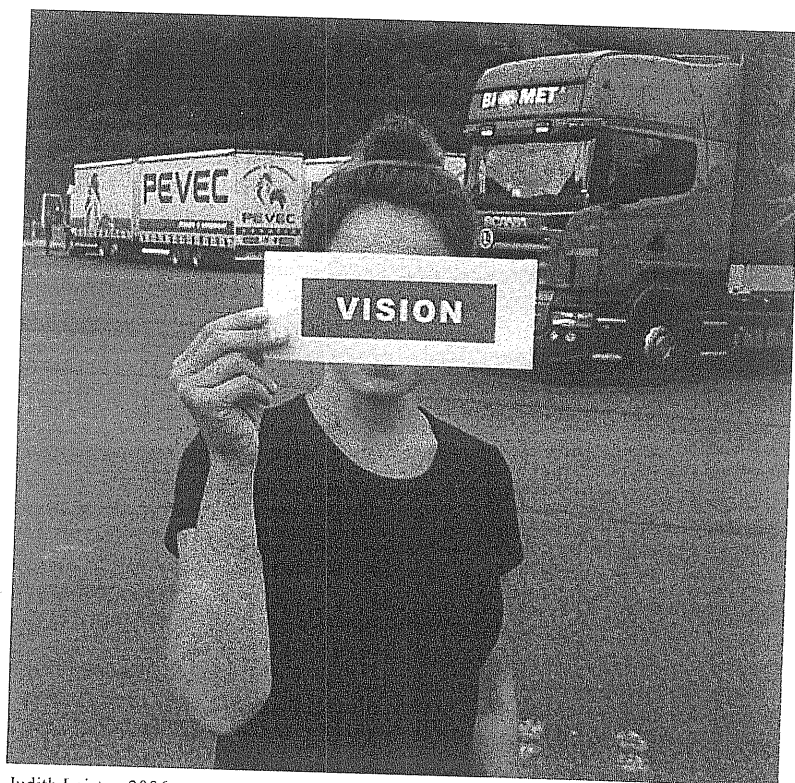
Pierre Bourdieu, if he had had the opportunity to visit Graz in 2003 and Vienna in 2006, would have pointed out these interrelations between marginalized physical spaces, the privileged aesthetic space, the limited acting space and the powerful social space, affecting projects like “real\*utopia” and “(Hi)Stories on site”. He would have also been concerned about the independence of art in view of the close affiliation between art, politics and economy which characterized both the project in Vienna and the one in Graz.

And Foucault? Maybe he would have been an enthusiastic member of the “Club of Non-Swimmers”, or rather, in line with his preference for breaking rules; he would have been a bad member and would have jumped into the Mühlgang for a swim. Then he would have been laying on the wooden catwalk to bath in the sun and musing about “heterotopia” as one of the most important anthropological constants by suggesting that there is “probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias” (Foucault 1967). In view of the running water, Foucault would have remembered his most popular example of heterotopia, what he defines as heterotopia par excellence: the ship, a general metaphor for the concept of heterotopia. In one of the most poetic parts of his essay on “other spaces” the French philosopher wrote: “The boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens (...) The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.” (Foucault 1967)

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Judith Laister



Judith Laister, 2006

Photo: Martin Krusche

## Me on Myself: Who looks?

An anthropologist in the field (Judith Laister at the motorway service area, St. Pankratz, Austria, in the course of the Forum Stadtpark project “Unerwarteter Besuch” / “Unexpected Visit”, 08/2006) meets an artist in the field (Martin Krusche, picturing and interviewing different people for his multimedia project “Memory / Truth / Vision”).

(<http://www.kultur.at/van/howl/junction/kont03/set/memory.htm>).

Martin Krusche comments the reaction of the participant observant who is hiding her eyes when being pictured as follows:

“Laister! Die als Kulturanthropologin zu beobachten gewohnt ist. Wenn sie aber selbst sich, wie unlängst bei einem Kunstprojekt, einer Kamera, also der Beobachtung, aussetzen soll, verbirgt sie ihr Gesicht und läßt sich nicht in die Augen sehen. Was bedeutet das? Hat man die stärkere Position, wenn man blickt als wenn man sich anblicken läßt?” (<http://www.kultur.at/van/next/note/transit/set01/zone04.htm>)

“Laister! As a cultural anthropologist she is used to keeping an eye on things. Yet, when she has to expose herself to a camera, hence observation, like in a recent art project, she conceals her face and doesn't let us look her in the eye. What does that mean? Does looking at something imply a stronger position than being looked at?”

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