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L’art en chantier: The arts, and the city in the making


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For the past few decades, artists have decided to leave their studios to engage more directly with the polis, working in the public realm of the city. Most of them were at first inspired by dissenting ideologies and linked to revolutionary movements – as reflects the manifests of the pioneers, the Happening, Fluxus or the Situationnists (Lebel 1968; Kaprow 1966; Debord 1958). Critical literature later showed how art and the artists engaging in the public sphere might also have been instrumentalized as a mean of domination or to legitimize urban redevelopment (Deutsche 1988; Deutsche and Ryan 1984; Zukin 1989; Cameron and Coaffee 2005; Ley 2003), while other authors saluted new ways for artists and public art to remain critic in the gentrified city (Lacy 1994; Phillips 2001).

Stéphane Tonnelat’s book takes place in the vast literature that explores the relation between art and the city. More precisely, the way artists can engage with the publics in urban context. Tonnelat – who has an academic background both as an architect and a social scientist – followed the works that artist Stefan Shankland lead from 2006 in the city of Ivry-sur-Seine (near Paris) on the site of a large urban redevelopment project. After a foreword by art historian Paul Ardenne, the book consists of two chapters: the first one forms the main argument of the book by Tonnelat, while the second one is a text by Shankland presenting his artistic practice. Between the two chapters, a photographic booklet illustrates the whole process that took place in Ivry.

The first chapter – written by Tonnelat – proposes an ethnographic feedback from the fieldwork he conducted following Shankland’s work between 2006 and 2012. It can itself be divided into three parts. The first one explains the context in which Shankland was asked by the city to accompany the urban project through artistic and cultural actions. Facing a lack of legitimacy and difficulties to gain access to the construction site, the artist decided to create the HQAC label (the French acronym for High artistic and cultural...
quality). Adopting the codes and vocabulary of urban planning – the HQE label is a common standard for sustainable building in France – Shankland managed to find funding for his project, and furthermore to create an interface between him, the contractors and the project owners. The author explains how the creation of this “quasi-label” is a reversal of a common tool of urban planning – often criticized as a mean of standardization of the city – to introduce blur an uncertainty to the urban project, as the HQAC contains no constraints for the artist and leaves him a large margin of manoeuver.

The second part of the chapter takes the form of a field notebook, exemplifying the approach of the artist through case studies of participatory artworks and performances lead by Shankland with the inhabitants of Ivry. With precise factual descriptions of the projects and their production processes, the author points out the importance of the relational dimension between the many actors that are involved in the making of the city: by mixing with the planners, the workers, and the inhabitants, Shankland and them developed a common language, exchanged knowledges and techniques, enabling new and unpredicted forms of collaboration.

The third part of the chapter offers a theoretical look on the whole experience and constitutes the main argument of the book. Tonnelat summarizes Shankland’s approach as an entryism: in seeking to “do like” – do like the urban planner, do like the contractor, do like the construction worker – the artist manages to marginally influence practices and ways of seeing of the stakeholders, inviting them in return to “do like” the artist. Using the same language, codes and practices as his interlocutors inspired them confidence and provided the artists access to the sphere of action of the urban project analyses Tonnelat, borrowing Richard Sennett’s concept of “loose analogies” (2008: 185).

Furthermore, the last part of the text comments on the role that art and the artists play within the process of urban planning. Basing his argument on the deweyan notion of experience, the author explains that Shankland’s work operates by blurring the line between art and work. Every actor, whatsoever part they play, is made aware of its own contribution in the creative process. Therefore the “experience” comes from the conjunction of the technical know-how deployed in the project, and the emotion it provokes. The author compares it to the pair Erfahrung-Erlebnis, used by Sennett (and before him Walter Benjamin, and Georg Simmel), to explain the complementarity of knowledge and emotion in the experience of art. The way Shankland tries to introduce emotion in the making of the city can be seen as a performativic criticism of urban planning professionals: the quality of an urban project cannot be assessed only on normative aspects but one’s must consider the “experience” of urban environment in a broader sense.

Finally, the book ends with a short text from a conference Shankland gave in 2013. This chapter presents more broadly his approach, and the reasons that lead him to develop the HQAC label for his projects in Ivry.

With its extensive reporting and precise investigation, L’art en chantier raises relevant questions on the role artists might assume when they are asked to take part in urban projects. It constitutes a good monographic analysis of Shankland’s work in Ivry, as well as a well-documented ethnological study on the making of the city, its protagonists, and their relationships. Tonnelat addresses the issue of participation and expertise in the production of urban spaces by moving beyond the classic opposition between instrumentalization and critique when it comes to the question of art and the city. This book will interest researchers working on the link between art and the city, participation
and social implication of artistic practices. Moreover, its methodological aspects are a precious account on how to approach such fields and long-term research. The author develops interesting remarks on the dichotomous relation between detachment-empathy inherent to all ethnological study, comparing the position of the scientist to the “do like” approach employed by Shankland.

The theoretical framework of the book is solid, revealing a strong pragmatist background with concepts borrowed from John Dewey, Richard Sennett or Daniel Cefaï. Yet, one could regret that the author did not widen it to a broader conceptual field, especially to urban and cultural geography. The whole analysis would have benefited from being replaced in the ongoing scientific debate on the politics of art, cultural lead urban development, and art history. The critique against standardization of the city – that Tonnelat notes in Shankland’s work – for example, is far from being new, it was at the very basis of the lettrist and situationnnist movements in the 1950’s. On the contrary, one could consider that the growing reliance of urban policies on artistic and cultural aspects constitutes itself a new standard or, at least, a form of “guaranteed city” (Breviglieri 2013). To conclude, while the book convinces by its concision, the clarity of its argument and the meticulousness of its approach, it has the flaws of its virtues: on such a fascinating subject, we might have liked to go even deeper in the analysis, as a lot of themes are evoked but not genuinely addressed, such as the autonomy of the artist, the issue of inclusion in participative actions, or the possible commandeering of artistic practices.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


