

# The Imperatives of Going Public and Becoming Contemporary

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*We all believe that the solution to our problems passes through our joint action!*  
<http://urbanrise.net>

Contemporary urban life is becoming ever more public. That which does not become public is rendered inexistent. That which is not manifested in public has hardly any claim to agency. Those who do not exert their rights to the public cease to participate in its production. In this essay, I will explore the ambivalences, conflicts, and contradictions inherently at work in the conditions of DIY strategies and crisis, self-organization and austerity urbanism. The imperative of going public is inextricably intertwined with the imperative of becoming contemporary. Public space – and public time – has been turned into the new urban frontier.

The present time is the most difficult territory to chart. Currently, we are witnessing the ongoing battles, truces, and negotiations in the war zone between private and public interests, formal and informal strategies, and planned and unplanned urban development. This war zone, formerly known as public space, can also be referred to as the newly emergent and nomadic borderland of political conflicts, social struggles, and citizens' movements. By the same token, this borderland is thoroughly colonized by neo-liberal economy, global capitalism, transnational governmentality, labor extraction, and resource diversion. This brings me to the slippages of the history of the

present, in a Foucauldian sense. The urban borderland is becoming the new frontier of the public's participation. This is not a participation based up routine invitation to gladly and willingly perform the commodified spectacle of decision-making with color crayons on sticky notes, but rather the radical and unpredictable participation in the given which constitutes our shared present. Participation is therefore not a choice, but rather, from a theoretical standpoint, understood as inescapably being part of the given, in which agency and making a difference towards change have to be carved out and redefined through practice.

I would like to proceed by sketching a cartography of contradictions. Some of the most striking ambivalences and conflictive agonies mark the current state of affairs. The first contradiction concerns contemporaneity. In a general way of speaking, contemporaneity is taken for granted. It is simply the time we live in, the time we witness, the time we share with others, whom we refer to as our contemporaries. Yet things are a lot more difficult than it seems. Contemporaneity has to be produced. It requires labor and investment, hard work and belief systems. Like other periodizations, it entails more than just a specific period of time. The specificity of any time has to be produced, which leads me to introduce the concept of the production of time. Architecture and art have played key roles in defining the spatial and visual regimes of contemporaneity.

Any one time is more than one time. There are the ones that are already always there, there are the other ones that have not arrived yet, there are the ones that are anachronistic, there are the ones that seem to reside outside of time and there are yet other ones that seem to continuously fall behind. This chronopolitical rhetoric turns time into a race. This shows us what is at stake. Time is used to delineate difference. Difference is perceived as hierarchy in time. Not all the people living in the present time are considered contemporaries. Such a hierarchization of time parallels the logic of modernity/coloniality. Walter D. Mignolo (2000: xxif.) speaks of

*the imperial classification and ranking of regions (for example, developed/underdeveloped or First/Second/Third Worlds, where the imperial and the colonial differences can be seen working in tandem) goes hand in hand with classification and ranking of people (for example, civilized/barbarians, humanitas/anthropos; black, yellow, brown, white; heterosexual/gay and man/woman in the First, Second, or Third Worlds, etc.).<sup>1</sup>*

This decisively chronopolitical difference resembles the older binaries that were introduced together with the modernity/coloniality paradigm. Firstly, this leads me to understand the neo-colonial conditions of the contemporary project. Secondly, this leads me to the concept of decolonizing contemporaneity.

The second contradiction concerns the understanding prevailing narratives and images of crisis. Generally, crisis is understood to be an abrupt or sudden change, a turning point. Even though all of the above said is true when we speak of the current crucial situation, it is not at all a turning point. Much rather one might attempt to describe it as a long-drawn-out turning “line”. The crisis has become the default of contemporaneity; it is the state of affairs, not sudden, not abrupt, but ongoing and durational.

*It is important to understand that economic crisis is a protracted process, not a single event. This is especially true of the current recession, which will continue to dominate politics but won't unfold on a steady, predictable, upward curve. [...] It is also important to grasp the depth and severity of the present crisis. (Sherry 2010: 19)<sup>2</sup>*

Cities are governed by crisis regimes. The governmentality of crisis emerges along with the crisis. Cities are more and more under pressure by neo-liberal governments. The state of exception has become the state of affairs and vice versa, the state of affairs is commonly understood as a state of exception. They move, or stall, in tandem. The images of precarious conditions embodied by camps, tents, soup kitchens, and solidarity manifestations are turning into the imagery of contemporaneity. What does it mean then to become contemporary? What does it mean then to make this becoming contemporary public? The imperatives of becoming contemporary and going public are turned upside down and inside out. Yet they do not disappear. Athens has become a bare city, a city of constant crisis. Austerity measures lead to restrictions on labor rights, further shrinkage of the welfare state, and to large-scale privatizations. The current crisis in Southern Europe, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, has led to different states of contemporaneity within Europe; the divide between the Global North and the Global South is now paralleled by a new divide between the European North and the European South. At the same time, the imposed crisis regimes are met with agency and resistance.

*However, the crisis itself can also be perceived as a common context. Although it broke out differently in each country, its causes, consequences and policies adopted in order to address it seem to follow similar patterns. Following a long period of neoliberal reforms that mostly led to today's crisis, further aggressive adjustments are imposed, both from international and domestic actors and interests. The imposed austerity programmes include, amongst others, the elimination of labour rights, the minimization of social welfare, and massive privatization programs; all portrayed as an inevitable solution. Under a "state of emergency", more authoritarian policies are adopted, often violating or abolishing human, political and social rights and leading to social and economic collapse. (Crisis Regimes 2013)<sup>3</sup>*

This leads me to understand the rhetoric of the crisis that declares a state of emergency to justify drastic austerity measures as inevitable. Public space becomes the borderland taking on all characteristics of a frontier. This new mobile frontier cuts through bare life.

The third contradiction concerns the celebration of DIY. The politics of self-organization, self-help, self-building, self-made cities have been celebrated for a number of reasons.

*Beyond political parties and ideologies and by abolishing divisions, Exarcheia unite us. Residents Committee of Exarcheia was formed in 2007 with the slogan "we take the neighborhood into our own hands". Since then, apart from bringing together active residents and discussing the daily problems of living in Exarcheia, our initiative attempts to resolve general problems of the neighborhood, without specific political party preferences. In Greece under the crisis and poverty, terror and ugliness, we claim the obvious: the right to a decent life for all. (Crisis Regimes 2013)<sup>4</sup>*

Conviviality, affective relations, affinities, and unexpected alliances are nourished through collective action. From La Tabacalera<sup>5</sup> in Madrid to Teatro Valle Occupato<sup>6</sup> in Rome, from workers' control in the factory of Viomichaniki Metalleutiki (Vio.Me) in Thessaloniki to the London Fields Lido in Hackney, the very existence of places for art, work, or health is owed to the initiative of private citizens. Right-to-the-city movements and DIY strategies have often joined forces – and aesthetic strategies.

*After a year of activities the Greek State attempted to close down Embros Theatre. Despite systematic efforts by the State Embros is still opened and now hosting many collectives and groups of the city. Since November there is weekly general assembly. From the 1–10 of February 2013 in Embros an intense programme of activities is taking place under the*

*title “where are we now” organised by Kolektiva Omonia – an open group of artists and theoreticians from different fields formed during the last year in Embros Occupancy. (Crisis Regimes 2013)*<sup>7</sup>

Citizens in Greece practice forms of politics marked by horizontal organization and anti-hierarchical network structures, the theatre being one example of many others like social kitchens, neighborhood assemblies, or communal green spaces. As much as self-organization, gift economy, solidarity,

and tactics of radical sharing give reason for hope and solidarity, I find myself still torn with their inherent contradictions. Private initiatives have to take over where public infrastructure, support, and institutions of the former welfare state do not exist any longer. There is therefore ample reason for the harshest of critiques of the underlying structural changes that will have a profound impact on the future of education, culture, work, and health. By making these sectors a private task, there is both reason for hope and reason for fear. This leads me to understand that we are currently witnessing dramatic reorganizations of the relations between private, communal, and public. These changes that are underway are too profound and too complex to yet be fully comprehended and judged.

I find the new and emerging conditions contradictory, conflictive, and, at best, confusing. The last part of my reflections concerns a number of selected present-day situations in which different scales of civic activism and urban agency highlight the ambivalent entanglement of DIY and austerity.

From 1980 onwards a group called UX, Urban eXperiment, has participated in the improvement of neglected sites of Paris without ever having been invited or authorized to do so. In their practice, preservation meets infiltration, monuments meet their new use. Not only did they clandestinely manage to restore the Pantheon clock, they also self-installed a cinema underneath the Trocadéro, and staged readings in monuments after dark. They use the networks and tunnels of urban infrastructure to add improvements to parts of the patrimony of Paris that are otherwise abandoned or neglected. The group’s members are, for the better part, secret. Crisis, care, and

creativity become an explosively entangled mix in which we understand how urban curating is radically self-initiated. It stretches the boundaries of the urban imagination, transgressing and challenging the borderland between legality and urban improvement.

In December 2012, the Association MG3.0\_Masterplan Mönchengladbach arrived at presenting to the citizens a new master plan for their city, which had been commissioned by the private association and developed by Grimshaw Architects in a year-long public and participatory process. In July 2013, the private initiative was adopted as official guideline for the future urban development of the city of Mönchengladbach. Legally, and I am following the association's website here, a master plan is "an informal and not legally binding document" (MG3.0).<sup>8</sup> However, the commitment of the local government turned the self-initiated document into a political master plan for the city. In times of austerity, citizens take the master planning into their own hands. Those who had the means to do so invited Grimshaw Architects. This group of men calls their initiative, which will have a large impact on the city's future, the third founding. The Association MG3.0\_Masterplan Mönchengladbach has successfully negotiated the borderland between private and public interests and determined through economic investment a self-initiated master plan for the city's future.

In June 2013, the Basel Art Fair showcased a "Favela Café" by Japanese artist Tadashi Kawamata, who had been invited to do one of his site-specific installations. Herzog & de Meuron's new fair halls stood in stark contrast to Kawamata's makeshift and seemingly fragile composition of walkways and huts made out of wood. A group of local artists and activists appropriated the square and added their own, really makeshift architectures complete with banners reading "Respect Favelas". The informal appropriation and its appearance, to use Hannah Arendt's term, on the public square, which is in fact property of the Basel Art Fair, was cleared by the police, who did not hesitate to use tear gas. The borderland between the new fair halls, the commissioned site-specific installation, and the local resistance is marked by the ambivalent relations between contemporary architecture and informality, neo-colonial aspirations and political ethics of identification, with an assumed and thus attributed position of weakness demanding protection and respect.

Do I identify with the transgressions of urban repair work and the clandestine underground of aesthetic urban action where the city fails to act? Am I in favor

of the initiators of a new master plan the city otherwise could not afford? Or do I join the critics of such a master plan, which relies on the joint influence of money and power? Do I join the protesters at the Basel Art Fair, or do I just take photographs for later use as their nuanced critic? Rather than drawing a conclusion, I want to return to the production of the contemporary. In a more optimistic view, the production of the present time does not necessarily have to obey the imperatives of becoming contemporary. Even though the terrain of neo-liberal/neo-colonial urbanization and its complete entrenchment with the art and architecture complex (cf. Foster 2011) prevails, the struggles and movements of resistance I have referred to show the potentiality and viability of counteracting the hegemonic and dominant regime of contemporary imperatives.