

EXPLORING SITE-SPECIFIC ART

Issues of Space and Internationalism

An essay by Judith Rugg

Published by I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd.

London – New York. 2010

Chapter 8.

[Pag. 157]

THE BORDER

Within the topographies of globalization, concepts of the border locate it as a multi-site and a place of discourse. As both a material and a conceptualizing space, the border is a *locus* that maps power relations and control; it is a place of conflict and transgression and a site of anxiety. As a discursive site, the border marks forms of dissension that define the limits of disempowerment as well as the threshold of potential intervention. Issues of preclusion, prohibition demarcate borders of instability in different kinds of international contexts in which the homeless, migrant, politically ‘disappeared’ and dispossessed are situated. This chapter investigates a number of site-specific artworks located within the terms of the border as a form of cultural positioning and a site where international social, historical and political boundaries converge and where hegemonies are perpetuated. Barcelona marked for redevelopment; an installation between two buildings in the centre of Istanbul; a performance at an art fair in Toronto; and a mixed media installation in Tijuana, Mexico.

Displacement and issues of urban development were significant in Jesus Palomino’s *Casa del Poble Nou* (1998) in Poble Nou, Barcelona, a brightly coloured ‘shack’ constructed out of seemingly discarded materials, situated on a derelict plot of land within close proximity of a half-demolished apartment building. The shack/hovel/hut/shanty, made out of apparently found materials of plastic, wood and cardboard, situated itself on a spatial and social boundary that was precarious, provisional and fragile, oscillating on the border between a real (art) object and a fictional house. Because the area of Poble Nou in Barcelona had been a traditional resting place and settlement for gypsies from Catalunya, people thought that the work was actually a functional house; paradoxically, therefore, it continued to exist as an artwork in the site for more than two weeks.

In its proximity to the side of the half-derelict apartment building to which it apparently clung, *Casa del Poble Nou* marked a boundary within a no-man’s land, created by the destruction and displacement made by processes of urban regeneration. Previously, Poble Nou had been a working class area characterized by low rents and artist’s studios. Palomino’s work was a part of an artist-run public art project designed to draw attention to the economic and social effects of redevelopment in Barcelona in the 1990’s and the destruction of neighbourhoods that were part of the city’s programme of urban transformation. *Casa del Poble Nou* highlighted the ways in which regeneration projects are inherently inclusionary and exclusionary, raising issues of belonging and identification. For years, El Raval, an equivalent area of Barcelona that was undergoing regeneration as Barcelona’s cultural quarter during that period, was referred to by its

residents as a 'bombarded place' reminiscent of a war zone, with its gutted houses and derelict streets.

It has been argued that in the agenda of urban regeneration, the eradication of any visible marginality is performed via the creation of commodified sites through standardized aesthetic strategies and 'designer urban environments'. [1] Traditionally in Barcelona, balconies on the outside of apartment buildings have functioned as transitional spaces – boundaries, between public and private space where people engaged in spontaneous encounters with their neighbours, grew flowers or hung out their washing. Urban regeneration replaced these spaces with the blank, sealed and immobile fascia of postmodern architecture. Palomino's structure, insinuating itself against a partly demolished building on an empty lot cleared for redevelopment, appeared as an act of defiance and transgression. It occupied the space between dereliction and impending architectural order of the postmodern architectural strategies of Barcelona's 1990's redevelopment programme. As an act of subordination and optimism, *Casa del Poble Nou* was an assertion of social space within the abstract space of urban 'renewal'.

Casa del Poble Nou in green, yellow and blue, claimed the right to the city by the marginalized to occupy and control space. Within the context of Barcelona, the work described a space of impending absence in its fragility, yet it was also intrusive in its declaration of its right to space. As a site of resistance, it threatened insubordination to the architectural, economic and exterior spaces (it was possible to enter the work), interference of narrative possibilities and the movement of the blue plastic roof caught by the wind, were all in defiance of the ideological imperviousness articulated by the fake marble and impenetrable cladding of the postmodernist architecture destined for the site. In its hazardous and vulnerable position on the edge of a vacant lot and its construction of apparently found materials, *Casa del Poble Nou* seemed situated on the border between the 'First World' and the 'Third World'.

Agitating at the edge of possession and dispossession, occupation and abandonment, *Casa del Poble Nou* existed in a suspended space of intervention, improvisation and intention. It made visible the normally unseen space occupied by the 'outsider' – the marginalized and the dispossessed. What normally is situated on the edge was brought into the centre through the positioning of the structure's brightly coloured materials and its physical proximity to an existing apartment building in the city. *Casa del Poble Nou* highlighted how the occupiers and inhabitants of such spaces as shantytowns, such as migrants or refugees, are only able to cross boundaries on a temporary basis, if at all. As such, the work evoked the condition of the marginalized as one of being perpetually outside the main body of architectural space and of society where inclusion was always temporary and provisional and always involved a return to the margins – 'to cross the tracks, to the shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town'. [2]

Casa del Poble Nou drew attention to international processes of economic dominance and subordination of space. In occupying a space of contestation, ambiguity and discontinuity, the work was a provocation to those city planners who seek to control space through processes of definition, regulation and categorization. In its border zone of conflict it described the boundary between refugee and resident and the potential of displacement for one to become the other in a different space and time. [3] The work evoked a liminal place of counter-narratives from where the minority, the urban

marginalized and exiled, may speak. *Casa del Poble Nou* interrupted the periphery of the derelict plot of land on which it was sited, and marked the limit of a new boundary of the marginalized – those slum and shanty dwellers whose numbers are increasing through the over-urbanization of cities worldwide. [4] The increasing prevalence of urban shantytowns has become a worldwide implication of urban growth. As the hidden, suppressed and forgotten of global cities, shantytowns and slums are developing an accumulative presence and ‘subaltern insistence’ into the more regulated spaces of the city. [5] The cities of the future, it has been proposed, will not be made out of glass and steel but out of crude straw and recycled plastic. [6]

Casa del Poble Nou seemed to represent those perceived to be surplus to the city and condemned to its margins. It was a sign for those displaced as a consequence of impending urban redevelopment in Barcelona and a surrogate for those absent. Apparently part of but also exterior to the apartment building to which it was ostensibly tenuously attached, the work highlighted concerns about the lack of provision of housing in the city. Yet, it also specified, and was located within, the empty space on which it simultaneously defined an edge, suggesting the peripheralization of people excluded from the inner city and of their access to basic means of subsistence. *Casa del Poble Nou* occupied a borderline site of intensity and a conflict of space in its position both inside the derelict plot and outside the partly demolished apartment building. Positioned on the borderline between the perceptual and the conceptual, it provoked an spatial ‘double-take’, seemingly strange and displaced, yet appropriate and ‘in place’ defamiliarizing the familiar and creating new relations of encounter.

City dwellers the world over witness the demolition and disruption of parts of the city to make way for the global spaces of modernity and the controlling effects of redevelopment. The eradication of historic apartment buildings and local shops are part of a general erosion of ‘neighbourhoods’ that are rapidly becoming obsolete in new architectural infrastructures. The repressive economic and political effects of the abstract spatialization of the city, where diversity and possibilities of instability are eradicated, include the erasure of the body. [7] In Doris Salcedo’s *Untitled* (2003), 1600 chairs were apparently crammed into a gap left by a demolished building (...)

[Text by Judith Rugg on Jesus Palomino’s *Casa del Poble Nou*, Barcelona 1998]

Notes

[1] Monica Degen, ‘Regenerating public life: a sensory analysis of regenerated public places in El Raval, Barcelona’, in Judith Rugg and Daniel Hinchcliff (eds) *Advances in Art and Urban Futures: Recoveries and Reclamations* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2002) pp.19-36.

[2] bel books, ‘Marginality as a site of resistance’, in Russell Fergusen, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (eds) *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990) pp. 341-343.

[3] Henri Lefebvre considers the ‘differential space’ of social experience and existence, the features of which are about difference and diversity. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

[4] In Mexico City, for example, it has been estimated that 60 per cent of the city’s growth is the result of people building their own dwellings on peripheral land without services. ‘Urbanization’

and 'favelization' have become synonymous in cities such as Sao Paulo and Amazon, where the growth of shanty towns accounts for up to 80 per cent of city growth. (Davis, *Planet of Slums*).

[5] In Ethiopia, slum dwellers make up 99 per cent of the urban population and in Mumbai there are between ten and twelve millions squatters and tenement dwellers; in Mexico City, Dhaka, Lagos, Karachi and Shanghai there are between six and ten million in each city (Davis, *Planet of Slums*)

[6] In particular cities in India, Africa, China Latin America and Southeast Asia (Davis, *Planet of Slums*).

[7] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.