

Urban Narratives

A round table discussion with Meira Ahmemulic, Antonio Scarponi and Elin Wikström.
Adapted to text by Katja Aglert, Martijn van Berkum and Janna Holmstedt.

Introduction

When the words *urban* + *narrative* are googled, you get about 4,170,000 hits. Three examples of hits at the first page are: a web-based project called “*The Urban Narrative – The word based representation of urban environments*”, a blog named “*A Kenyan Urban Narrative*” and a book announcement of “*Global finance and Urban Living – A study of Metropolitan Change*”. This variety of results indicates something about the multiple ways of entering the world of urban narratives.

In the context of SQUID, we found out in 2008 that *urban* and *narrative* were the most common search words, or themes, used in the SQUID archive. The varieties in approaching, investigating, or tip-toeing around these themes are as many as the number of contributions. Nevertheless, we thought it was an interesting thread we had stumbled upon and felt compelled to follow up and decided to do this under the theme of *Urban Narrative*. We were challenged by the question how these terms were related to one another. Could narrative provide an instrument to comprehend, read or decode the apparent complexity of the urban? Does it have the potential to transform and create new dynamics and interpretations? And how are they translated into artistic practices?

Thus as a first step, we invited three “specialists” on the subject of urban narratives – the artist Meira Ahmemulic, the architect Antonio Scarponi and the artist Elin Wikström – to participate in a round table discussion. All of them have, through different practices, developed strategies, experiences and knowledge for engaging into the public sphere. This text is based on the discussion, which took place at the project space Hit in Göteborg 30th November, 2008.

- Katja Aglert, Martijn van Berkum and Janna Holmstedt

Mapping an Urban Condition – “*City of Names*”

Meira: In 2004 I curated an exhibition at Röda Sten, a contemporary art space in Göteborg (Sweden) together with two graffiti writers. The theme was *The City* and the idea was to also work outside the exhibition space, to activate public spaces – not necessarily in the city center.

I wanted to take the culture of street art back to the suburb, more specifically to Bergsjön, the suburbs where the graffiti culture in Göteborg started. This is a quite typical residential area from the 1960s, when one million new dwellings were built over a ten-year period. An open call for ideas was mailed out to all invited artists. Eventually, a crew of 20 people, graffiti writers from Berlin, were invited to work with a project in Bergsjön. Their proposal was to build a city based on tags, three-dimensional tags that would become buildings, which you could enter. A tag is a self-given name, a hybrid between image and word and as such they would build a *city of names*. The idea was to make this happen at Rymdtorget, the largest square in Bergsjön, and to invite people living there to participate, to take on a new identity and to contribute in building the city by creating a tag. But for a range of reasons, mainly related to ownership, it wasn't possible. The one space we could get permission to use for this project was the football field in the area, basically the only place that didn't have any representatives claiming it. I applied for permission to use half of the football field, somehow thinking the other half could be used by the kids! [laughter]. This showed to be a mistake, since it was going to be the European Championships and a lot of kids would want to play soccer using the whole field. On the contrary, the graffiti writers soon took over the whole field and of course it created conflicts. The kids asked “Who gave you permission to be here?” and the graffiti writers, otherwise used to do illegal work, said “Tell them it's legal that we're here; it's legal, right?”.

When the kids realized they didn't have any say in the building of the city, they started to vandalize it. I found this interesting, because the position of who were the “vandals” shifted and the graffiti writers had to barricade the city to protect it from the kids. As the kids claimed the football field they forced the city to move to only half of the field. The graffiti writers realized they had started to act as the house owners they themselves previously had criticized. And something new could begin.

So, what happened was that the graffiti writers, who had never done a social project like this before and who normally were the ones in opposition, discovered themselves in the role of city planners and property

owners. They hadn't thought about what it meant to invite "everybody" to participate in building a city, and thus they hadn't had any previous discussions about it. Can it be done – and how? How does it work if 50 kids come up to you with all their ideas, and you think their ideas are not as good as yours? How do you deal with that? The graffiti writers way to deal with it was that they decided on their own; they started to build the city without taking into consideration what the kids who lived in the area wanted.

This happened the same year as the law concerning graffiti was changed in Sweden. It was now considered to be a major offence, which means you can go to prison for up to two years. Since my project was graffiti-related I had meetings with the police every day. It became a tense situation, because every day the police was trying to catch someone tagging, red-handed, to state an example.

I also had meetings with a new group called "*Trygg, vacker stad*" [*Safe, beautiful city*, editorial note], which is a joint effort between different municipal administrations, private organizations and companies such as Göteborg Property Association, etc. I was called there, because they couldn't understand how I got permission to do this project. It didn't fit their policy. The board of "*Trygg, vacker stad*" consisted, among others, of the director of the office for traffic and public transport. I had gotten money from both Västtrafik (the public transport company) and the Culture administration for the project, but the chairman didn't know that. The board thought I must have "tricked" them in some way. This made them realize that they were not united – if one of the city's administrations can give money to something other administrations are trying to prevent, well that's not good. So after this project the Culture administration is included in this group too.

Katja: Why was it important to use the name "city", if the idea was to make 3-dimensional tags? What was your interest in making a city of names and how did the city manifest? Did you have a discussion beforehand with the crew?

Meira: No, I hadn't even met them before they arrived in Göteborg. It was the crew's idea – based on the condition in Bergsjön that I introduced them to – to come together and build a city with the kids there. That was the idea. Nobody had done anything like that before. It all happened in only two weeks, the material was mostly collected stuff from containers, etc. Since they were doing renovations close-by, there was a lot of stuff laying around. The idea with inviting graffiti writers had something to do with "writing the city", maybe a farfetched connection now, but I'm also working with text. So it was not unimportant for me that the city was text-based. By inventing your own tag you give yourself an identity. A tag resists the language and identities given to you by society; through a tag you can become who you want. You create your own identity and define your own city. And the base of writing/tagging is still the alphabet.

Martijn: You said that the intention was to work with the people living there and then the graffiti writers became top-down urban planners themselves. Was there any change? Did you manage to establish some kind of legitimacy and meaningful exchange with the community?

Meira: After the first vandalization of the city everything changed. Everyday there was a crisis of some sort. Should we stop the project, or is it meaningful to go on? We decide that it was, but that things had to change. And after a while the kids were really participating and on the opening there was a big party in the area. So we continued to go there the rest of the summer, doing graffiti tours with the kids and providing bus tours to Röda Sten so people could see the rest of the exhibition, to get the "*City of Names*" contextualized more.

One funny thing was that there were these allotment gardens in the area, where mostly older men were growing things and they wanted to have some wood from the city afterwards, which they got. The allotment gardens ended up looking really nice with some big writers names like Bates, Akim and Zast who had all tagged the city. But, then the City (of Göteborg) complained because allotment gardens shouldn't look like that and it had to be painted over. It was a shame, because it was so nice to see the traces of the city left in the area. But it was against the policy.

Antonio: They are called "*Schreber Gardens*" in German. Schreber is one of the founders of pediatrics, children medicine. He invented this concept because it was a way for urban people to grow food and at the same time get physical activity, to develop moral and bodily "rectitude". They were quite well spread in Switzerland and Germany. Also quite institutionalized, very controlled. Now it is a social thing. In Helsinki for example, it was given to people who served in the war, to soldiers. As thanks they were given a piece of land, with a cabin to keep the tools, but not allowed to inhabit. But in the end it was often used as a summerhouse, or a sauna, and so on.

Elin: Also in Sweden it has this double meaning, a liberating practice at the same time as it is controlling, a quite nasty example of social engineering, but it has these liberating aspects too. In Sweden it is more

connected to the working class during urbanization, as means to prevent alcoholism, to sort of transform the negative parts of poverty into positive parts. People should learn how to care, instead of being destructive in their situation. Helping the working class to improve their life on the one hand and on the other hand controlling it top-down. But if you would check different allotment gardens in Sweden, I'm quite sure there are associations that are voluntarily organized, while others were formed top-down.

They are interesting as half-public, half-private initiatives, in comparison to the square you are talking about, Meira. The way I read your project is that it cooks down to *what can you do and what can't you do* and ownership in terms of public space. I found it quite fascinating I got to know that in Umeå, the city where I teach – because of the financial crisis – there are a lot of city planning projects that have been cancelled now, like refurbishment of the city's squares, because the companies that own the spaces are pulling out. That was really an eye opener for me because, coming from Sweden, I have had a false idea that a square in Sweden would be owned by the city. A lot of what one is used to think of as public spaces, like parks and squares, is, quite surprisingly, very often privately owned.

So I think, what's really interesting with your project, is how it is not only about the discourse of legal or illegal graffiti, it is also about private owners and the city planners connected to the local authorities in that part of the city; it's like a battle of power between them, a battle between free market forces and state (or whatever) regulations. Really a very complex project, I think.

Antonio: But I think what is also interesting, in the application for permission, that the authorities create a temporary exceptional field of existence: from this day to this day, from here to there. This spot, the soccer field, there's nothing around it, there is nothing to do; there is only *play*. So it is also metaphoric, a condition speaking about play, and there you are allowed to do whatever you want. But as soon as you get out of these boundaries you get big trouble. This is something that interests me very much because it's like a parenthesis. If this would be done in a gallery, no problem, because it's a safe box, but as soon as you get out of there you create a reality that is organized according to different values – subversive values – according to the system outside. It's like a gate, like a free zone, or temporary no-man's land, like a bubble of a different state of rights in a specific field.

But among all the material you used, there is also “human” material in terms of people you collaborated with. They have their own values, their own way of distinguishing themselves, you know. We are the same band, the same group, we have to distinguish each other in order to mirror ourselves and exercise our coolness in what we do.

“To Build Reality is to Build Representations”

Antonio: I'm an architect with a PhD in Urban Design. I use visual culture – I like the expression *visual culture* better than *art* because I don't conceive of art pieces as such; I am more interested in visual knowledge. I think of my work as *conceptual devices*, tools that shift symbolic values or the representation they contain. I consider this as a practice of what I like to call a *subversive imagination*, in the sense that the design practices, or projects in general, carry the power to see reality according to a different set of values. It is a potential *what if?* Saying this – after so many years of working, studying and so on – I started to come to some conclusions, so to speak, and very recently I found out that if I can sum up what I'm working with, it's about representation. What we do as architects is to build representations. This is my way to problematize architecture in a very broad sense; building reality is to build representations.

I think design should not represent an idea of aesthetics of form, but an idea of society, an idea of what society should look like. An object of design, a space, or the making of something, inevitably contains a view of society. So this is what I'm trying to do, to put it down in theoretical terms and in practice. I do designable things; I work a lot with maps. On the one hand you could say that all I do is visualizing information. It could be physical objects; it could be 2-dimensional, installations, interactive. For instance, I've done an installation, now traveling, called “*Dreaming Wall*”, in collaboration with Stefano Massa, Federico Pedrini and Antonio De Luca. It is a public space installation originally designed for Milan – a green-colored phosphorescent wall that glows at night, displaying text messages sent by phone, or submitted on the Internet. A computer controlled UV laser beamer projects these text messages that last for few a minutes on the wall and then dissolve again. The project is a hacking of public space; it drifts away from the functionality of everyday life and creates what I refer to as the *subconsciousness of a city asleep*. It's called “*Dreaming Wall*” because it only works at night. During the day it collects the thoughts and then reveals them during the night, in a random way.

The idea is to engage in public spaces and to expand public spaces into virtual spaces. It's a way to also use blank facades and claim the vertical spaces, which nowadays are used for billboards and commercials. In "Dreaming Wall" there is no control, it could be used by people for protest, for poetry; people could say "I love you" or "I hate you". If there are any racist messages, for example, it will be shown, and people can reply to the provocation, because you can respond in real time.

Ideally it would be a permanent part of a public space but I have neither found the money, nor the institutions, to actually make it happen, because most of the time the problem is that politicians are afraid it will run out of control. We originally made it for a competition; we didn't win, but then developed it ourselves instead. There is a website called www.dreamingwall.net and the idea is that in ten years we will have the biggest random archive of dreams.

The idea is to collect all the messages, make a book, find some kind of order – key words, for example, you can search "Obama" and then be able to read all the messages containing this word – and to print the book with fluorescent ink, so you can only read it in the darkness.

Elin: The idea has been done before in different contexts, notice boards and text messages, but the way you describe it is so poetic, to collect information in daytime and present it during night, and a beautiful idea with the book with fluorescent letters. But maybe if I would only hear about it, not hearing all your other interesting and more theoretical ideas, I might not have thought it to be such an interesting project. My critique would be, if it isn't just fragments of messages without context? Isn't it a bit like Facebook, but without images? Could you please explain?

Antonio: It's actually the opposite of Facebook, in the sense that you are anonymous. You don't have to subscribe; you can write whatever you want and it is simultaneously shared among different kinds of people in a physical place. Facebook is a private network, sharing information about whatever; chatting. It is a way to challenge people by saying: "Okay, what are your dreams?" Because the idea is that you commit yourself to deliver a message to the world in that specific moment. What are you dreaming of? What is your complaint? The subtitle is a quotation from Martin Luther King's speech "I have a dream". So, what is your dream? You are able to say whatever: "I love my girlfriend"; "I love Berlusconi"; "I am tired today"; "I want to change the world".

Elin: But isn't that exactly what the market wants us to do?

Antonio: What is the market?

Elin: Well, the driving force for companies, for example, is to figure out peoples desires and to create situations, events, products etc. that fulfill peoples desires.

Antonio: I talk about dreams, not desires.

Elin: What is the difference?

Antonio: You submit a dream, something you recognize as a dream. A desire is something more trivial or different; a dream is more hypothetical. But then again you can get into a useless, endless conversation because each of us in this room could perceive *dream* and *desire* in a different way. We wanted to clarify this by using the quotation, putting a powerful speech, "I have a dream", in public space and create public interactions. Period. Then God knows what happens, it could be lies, boring comments... We wanted to depict a *collective subconscious*, a visual buzz, and figure out the mood of the urban environment in real time.

Martijn: I think it's important that it is not instrumentalized. There is no economical function to what you're doing. That is a difference.

Meira: You said it hadn't become public yet? Why not do it illegally?

Antonio: At the moment it's a program, it runs on the Internet and it has visited several institutions in different countries, an artist-run space in Stockholm for example. I don't believe in autonomy in this sense, because from my point of view it gets legitimized, it gets recognized, by an institution saying: We believe in this idea; we commit to it; we want to promote it; let's make it! Otherwise it's just squatting, which is also interesting but it is something else. As you said Elin, it has been done before, but it's very important how you do it, the way we problematize it. The way we want to do it is really expensive because it deals with

fluorescent paint, UV laser (which means you don't see the beam) that excites the fluorescent paint so that the texts fade away. There is no ideal place for it, for the "Dreaming Wall" itself is a device with which to read an urban condition. It was conceived for a square in Milan where teenagers and younger people hang out at late night, so there is a crowd situation every night and there is a huge blank wall next to it. It was designed for that specific situation. Then, of course, you can find similar situations in any city. The idea is to re-qualify a scattered part of the city, to use a wasted wall so to speak, to reveal the subconscious of the city or community. Ideally for me it would be completely molded into the everydayness of the environment. I don't want to make an event, but an extension of the square, which is the most common everyday thing that you can have. Ideally an anti-event, in other words, not a spectacle.

A Manifesto on Urban Narrative

Antonio: A while ago I started to formulate myself in the form of manifestos. I brought a few with me here today, about narratives and urban narratives [see contribution #38, editorial note]. I don't want to read it all because it would be too boring, but since I was to come here I thought, let's bring my "tool box" and share it with you. It is one page, ten paragraphs; it's basically like a book index, short abstracts for a long essay. Maybe we can go through each of them and discuss it? The first idea is that, "without narratives the urban wouldn't exist, because the urban is a condition, and without the process of narrating it (representing, mapping, photographing, storytelling) we wouldn't have the condition as such". In other words, without the map we won't have the world. What do you think about that?

Elin: I'm completely skeptical. No way, it can't be like that.

Antonio: Great! Well, this is statement 00, the basic condition. I call it *Fiat Lux*, which are the first words in the Bible: "Let there be light". Wittgenstein says: the limit of the world is the limit of the language. The point is, if you are sick and you cannot name the disease you have, you are not sick. In other words, if this is my land I need to spell it out. I need to make a line and mark it: this is mine, this is yours; I need to mark it and name it. The first thing invaders do is to rename all the places; re-defining, erasing. So without a name it doesn't exist. I wrote it like this: "it cannot be recognized, narrated, historicized or represented".

Elin: Wittgenstein's idea of the limit of the world in connection to language, that I can connect to, because language to me has more dimensions than a map. Language can be physical, like a conversation between two people, or it could be how authorities use it, the law text for example. There are so many different dimensions. My spontaneous reaction is that mapping has to do with utopian ambitions. Isn't it a Western concept connected to Western rationalism?

Antonio: For me narration stands for a map. Narration is just a form of representation. Bruce Chatwin wrote a beautiful book about the song lines in Australia, singing the land is a way of mapping in this nomadic culture. It is how they get around.

Martijn: For them the mapping is both story and a map of the land.

Janna: It is also a time-based map, walking in the landscape, finding your way through singing. It is the map as a process, not as a static image.

Antonio: If we assume this, from my point of view this has two implications. The first implication, if we would deliberately not represent something, we would not recognize it as such. Or, on the other hand, something, which does not exist, could be mapped and represented even if it doesn't exist – making a problem where there is no problem. For instance, I don't recognize Palestine. I don't draw it on the map at all, but it is there, as mental map and a space with a limit. Representing is including and excluding, to state what exists and what does not exist. Like the Medieval maps – the belief that heaven was in a certain place and hell in another – represented a cosmology and a way to create a value of inclusion and exclusion. If we assume that this is true, that without representation the world would not "exist", you can mark what exists, raise priorities, make a point, or erase something. The practice of mapping is including and excluding.

Janna: But it also implies that – when you say, to represent is to recognize it as existing – it indicates a community. If I make a representation of something, it means it can be recognized by me and by you. Instead of a solipsistic view, a solitary state of being in the world, you start to share a worldview, share beliefs...

Antonio: Precisely! You can also choose to represent something that doesn't exist, I use the "axis of evil" as an example that Bush, at a certain point, came out with: North Korea, Iran and Iraq. This axis does not exist at all, but raised a policy of anti-terrorism according to this imaginary collaboration between countries.

Martijn: And it creates a narrative, by enhancing certain values and perspectives.

Elin: I really like the way you open up the concept of the map, of representation and narration. But at the same time – when one discusses visual production – I think of two different functions of visual production, and one function is of course to reveal something. I have a problem with visual production, because it focuses more on revealing than hiding. That's why I, in my practice, go against that. I have the goal to represent the un-representable, which is like a completely crazy thing to do, because one will always fail.

Janna: There's a scholar, Walter J. Ong – I read a book by him many years ago that was very important to me – who talks about orality and literacy and what happens when you, in an oral society, with an oral conception of the world, learn to read and write. The larger scope being: how has the technology of writing, the mass production of books and now the media, altered the human mind and our sense of being in the world? He uses a lot of striking examples of what he calls primary oral cultures – primary meaning that there is no reading or writing whatsoever. It is a society of tellers and listeners. It is a completely different understanding of the world, because knowledge has to be narrated, interpreted, formalized and re-told in order to be stored and remembered at all. Thus, it's organic in the way that it has to be in tune with what is relevant now, at this point for this specific society. It is context sensitive. Tradition is constantly re-negotiated, but also highly controlled. The storytellers are the collective memory of society, when they die, the archive vanishes.

When you live in a literate society you have a very different concept of history, of truth and of memory. You have a written law and you can go back in the archives and trace what was being said at different moments in time word by word. This attitude of referring to what was "actually said", is a completely different way of understanding language and how meaning is formed and transferred. It has altered our juridical system and our view of history and truth. Learning to read also affects the way we think; it alters the way we describe and view the world. One example – I will not get the facts right here – but the basic idea is that when you are asked to draw something round, if you don't have a written language, you will draw a concrete object, like a lid or a wheel. But after just a few months of learning reading and writing, you will instead draw an abstract circle. You learn to categorize and conceptualize the world in a specific way. Moving from orality to literacy also affects our identity, the idea of being "inside" ourselves entered with widespread and silent reading. Individualism arrived, some claim, with the modern novel. From an oral perception of language – language being sound and time – we, with the written and printed word, started to view language as assembled signs, as a textual space.

For me these different perceptions – these different ways of being in the world – opens up a whole world of "gaps" that we constantly try to bridge – the attempts to connect theory and practice for instance, two fields that we feel are separated, knowledge primarily belonging to the theoretical sphere. For example, in artistic practice and in research, the talk about know-how, tacit knowledge – or how you phrased it Elin: representing the un-representable – is to me an attempt to close the gap between abstract theorizing and a knowledge that comes from within a practice. I think of this as an oral understanding. During a short period in our lives we have an oral experience of the world, though not living in an oral society. Language is sound, not sign; it is performative. An oral understanding, as I see it, is context based, it implies situational sensitivity. It includes the body. To participate in a discussion in a group creates a completely different understanding of what was being said than if you write down the exact words and read it afterwards. Body language, intonation, eyes, identification, reactions and responses are left out. Written language and literate societies are focusing so hard on the word.

Katja: I think of Tor Nørretranders idea that what is actually said in a conversation is what is not said.

Janna: Yes, he calls it *exformation*. Information is just the verbal exchange going on, but exformation is everything one has in one's mind while talking, but not explicitly says.

Meira, you have also published a book, "*City of Names*", and this time a city was built at Mariannenplatz in Berlin. Can you say something about that?

Meira: My intention was never to make a book, I shot over 30 hours of video during the time the city was built in Berlin a year later. My intention was to make a video based work. I struggled with that material for

a year. I had also made notes, which when transcribed consisted of around one hundred A4 pages. For the filming I set some restrictions for myself so as not to get used to only looking through the camera. It was important for me to firstly be an inhabitant in the city and secondly a film maker (I was the only one who was always there who didn't build anything). So I decided not to film more than one hour a day and I never filmed any conversations. While writing though, I had no formal restrictions and I wrote down conversations and thoughts.

I knew, while shooting, that I wasn't going to make a documentary. I also decided it was my point of view that was going to be represented; the story of the city was going to be filtered through me. Then, when I looked at the material, the visual material didn't have the narrative, it was missing from the images. The visual material is also so burdened with references. When you see a tag or street art, you connect it with New York, the hip hop scene and graffiti. You tend to think of certain things and to me there was a different story here that wanted to be told, one that the visual material and images seemed to be hiding. In the book there is also a "lack" of images, only 25 frames, as in one second of video. To me it allows another story to come forward. That's why I choose to do it like that.

Janna: I find that the language you use in the book is the most telling for me, since it's impossible to describe it in terms of genre. The reader finds notes, journalistic writing, reflections, prose, even lyrics – and this is to me a very conscious choice of language. As if trying to escape and resist the traditional documentary or reportage mode. This fascinates me, the precise choice of language, which actually opens up loads of implications, possibilities and potentials. Through this you avoid letting the book become a mere metaphor. The book could be read as: "Oh, this is city planning in a nut shell", but it is not. Instead it tells us a lot about how things work in terms of power structures, causes and relations, as well as possible preconditions for participatory processes. How can it be done? How do we behave while engaged? I think this complexity is very nicely displayed in the book. You connect fields that are not usually connected and thus generate "telling images" through storytelling.

And when you talked about the "*Dreaming Wall*", Antonio, and the idea of making a book out of it, it strikes me how in these projects – confronting all the restrictions, the ownership dilemmas, realizing how difficult it is to actually do something in public space, but going through with the projects nevertheless – the book becomes like a stand-in for public space.

Transforming the World into a Database

Antonio: The problem is, or the fact is, that there is so much information "out here" that you need to organize it, to visualize it, discard it, and in order to do so we create "images", as maps, but also as narrations. Like Google: Internet was blasting of information and they found a way to operate it and visualize it. Google is creating our world nowadays, controlling it in some regards. From my point of view, on a map, it is more interesting what is not shown, rather than what is actually shown. What has been excluded? It's unavoidable. It is difficult to know what Google is "hiding" so to speak. But Google doesn't only organize what's on the Internet. If you have a mobile phone and you want to know where the nearest pizzeria is, you go to Google map and search for it, so what Google also is doing is transforming the world into a database.

Martijn: The authority changes, you yourself can contribute to the indexing and mapping with your own images and opinions. But what happens is that you get a "popular vote", by uploading images to Google, for example, we ourselves create a new hierarchy and instead of a visible authority that controls information, you get an invisible authority. "Everybody" is contributing to it, but at the same time we are also suppressing a lot of information as well. You get a popular authority, a popularity ranking, in which a lot of information is discarded.

Antonio: This is what happens with this social networking. To me, you are committing yourself to a big brother, to Facebook or to Flickr and everybody knows what you are doing, who your friends are. You completely lose the public control of yourself. The shift in this case, is that the authorities "out there" are we ourselves. If you want to stress it further: what would happen in case of civil war? Since everybody has mapped out themselves and each other, friends and relations, religion, taste. For me this is really scary. That is something you have already with Google. If I google my name there is a representation of me out there that I cannot control.

Katja: About gmail and yahoo e-mail, they have the right to use information you send through email, someone said who had read the agreement very carefully.

Janna: Like the employer? The employer has the right to check work mail; it belongs to the company.

Katja: In relation to the themes at SQUID, we who run the website are the one's organizing the content – highlighting, including, excluding, organizing information.

Elin: But how can the organization of information escape control?

Janna: It can't. I'm just thinking here that, yes of course it's representing, it's picking out, highlighting. But the way we talk about it here, is as if that is something wrong per se, as if we are trying to avoid representations. I think it's something good to actively read, to try to visualize the information you have in order to get a new reading of it. Then you use it until it becomes meaningless and then you try again. To me that's an ongoing dialogue; that's not necessarily exerting power, as long as it's not static, like this is "The Story", this is "The World Map".

Elin: Yes, then a better question is: when does control become negative? And when is it productive?

Antonio: This has huge implications, you use the word dialogue, I would use the word *world*, because if you say these are the categories that we use, I can say in another blog, she's wrong and these are the real categories. So this is a fight, a symbolic fight. Or, as Umberto Eco called it in 1968, "semiological guerillas". His point was that in '68, when semiotics was exploding as a discipline, then, for that group of scholars, it was a way to get people aware of the meaning of symbols, educating them how to read symbols. You can use them, but you can also refuse them. You take them as potential "weapons". This is important, this is also what we do with art: positioning, continuing fighting with medium. But this is also content. We construct our world with priorities. My point is that reality is a result of this fight that goes top-down and bottom-up continuously.

Face-to-face Encounters

Elin: What I could throw in from my practice is where it comes from – in relation to what we've been talking about in terms of representation and narration and projects like yours Meira. The connection I see with the project you presented is the interest in working with an actual situation, based on collaboration, participation, face-to-face interaction, physical contact. I haven't done a project based on urban planning, but I find the subject very interesting. But there are a lot of similarities in our practices. I'm also struggling, as you are, with how to document projects like these. And I find the publication "*City of Names*", extremely expiring and inspiring in how you have solved different problems. The book is as interesting as the project itself. And in relation to Antonio's interests, what I relate to and what is typical for my projects, is that I have tried to come up with a practice where face-to-face encounters and context sensitivity is not just talked about, but actually *practiced*. What I have tried to do in my projects, I'm not sure I have succeeded, is to go against the idea of "The Story". It doesn't matter if it's verbal, written, or symbolic. I have tried to refuse to have a beginning and an end and I have picked up a tradition from performance art, rather than conceptual art, to use the repetition as a way of getting rid of a beginning and an end. If repetition in my earlier work was about going up and down, up and down an escalator for example, it is in my later projects – such as "*Aquatic Aliens*" [see contribution #31, editorial note] – about repeating the same set, to go to another context and invite speakers on the same subjects. Repetition, or re-enactment, is important for my work. In terms of representation, I'm more interested in trying to represent the un-representable.

What I really like with conceptual art and context-based art, is that artists are not only critical of ingrained modes and methods for visualization, or thinking, or acting, but it is physical. It is about the history of ideas; it's about the history of image production. I think it's such an important part of art history; an art practice that questioned the Cartesian subject and that starts not with *saying*, but in *practicing* the idea that identities are always *instable*, that our perception of the world is never stable, never static. Modernism is interesting in the sense that the body of the artist, of the critic, is hidden from the process. Someone called modernism "body-phobic", the body of the producer is not allowed to be seen and there is a link to our previous discussion about Internet, as in one way being productive and on the other hand not being productive, since it tends to become too much surveillance and control. Also bodies are hidden in that process. That's why I think it is important to talk about what it was, during the 60s and 70s that conceptual artists and performance artists did. They actually revealed themselves as "bodies". I'm not sure they knew at the time, but the effect of it is extremely interesting, because it has questioned the role of the artist, the role of the critic, the Greenbergian tradition, the White Cube and the idea of the audience as a homogenous

group, the “neutral” space with “neutral” discussions, “neutral” people and “neutral” art. So what I like with this practice is that it is based on names: What is your name? What is your background? What is your context? What do you represent? It is built on the particular and that is a kind of context sensitivity that I think is very valuable.

Janna: I think of another thing in relation to “hiding the body” and your practice: it is being aware of the ethics of representation, being aware of *who, when, why, where* and *in what way*. When you engage in a practice that focuses very strongly on presence, physicality, on engaging in a particular situation, you enter into the ethical. What is control? Exploitation? What do you want to use your position for? And while listening to Antonio, I think more of the ideology that a representation can reveal – or hide.

Elin: I also like to stress the playful and humorous part, because without that, there’s no twist of reality, no absurdity. I would feel that the ethics of such a practice would be very unproductive. So it is very important I think.

Martijn: What I find interesting with your work Meira, is that you reveal the “hidden bodies” through the discussions that derive from your project “*City of Names*”: the conflicts with different authorities that surface; the police looking for the taggers, trying to catch them in the act. So much is revealed through a staged situation. About how public space is policed and controlled, about who is controlling it and you can see these “hidden bodies” emerging.

Meira: One thing with graffiti is that it is in one way “hidden bodies”, but the work is always public and it is never general, that’s what I find interesting about it. The tags are very personal, they are as personal as they can get. And always public, otherwise you do not “exist”, as Antonio said. If you aren’t visible, if you haven’t mapped out your route, you don’t exist – in public space and as a graffiti writer.

Elin: But I think their bodies are present, though not visible. It’s just that they are hiding from being seen by controlling elements. You cannot print a tag from a computer; it is physically sprayed.

There is a quality of narration that is more like urban legends. I had this experience with someone on a plane. Someone said “Oh, wow, so you’re an artist! So what do you do, do you paint or do you do sculpture?” and I was like “No, I don’t paint and I don’t do sculptures. For example I have done a project where I, for three months, bought clothes and then returned them the day after and lived like that for three months. Just to save money”. And then: “Oh that’s interesting, I’ve heard of this before, and then when you returned the clothes after using them you had changed the label and put your own name in it”. And I was like: “No, I didn’t do that!” “But that’s what I’ve heard!” So then I understood that this project had been spread. It’s like a myth, creating a myth. Somebody has told about it and then it’s like this whispering game, it changes a bit. And then it comes back to me and it has improved! I wish I had come up with that idea ‘cause it’s much better!