Terrain Vague: Eric Hattan and the Crisis of Representation
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In 1995, the Catalan architect and theoretician Ignasi Solà-Morales Rubió published an essay entitled 'Terrain Vague'. He observed that it had become difficult to depict the contemporary city with traditional means of representation, for instance focusing on individual buildings, or on the skyline. A more adequate representation of the metropolis, in his view, was provided by photographers such as John Davies, Thomas Struth, Manolo Laguillo and Jannes Linders, who were not looking at the city centre, but on 'empty, abandoned space, in which a series of occurrences have taken place'.[1] Of course, the notion was not Solà- Morales' invention. Terrain vague is frequently used as a reference to derelict industrial zones or demolished residential areas, synonymous with terms such as 'wasteland', 'fallow land', 'non-place' or 'no man's land'. It coincides with the experience of deindustrialisation and urban renewal, which leaves large areas of cities in a derelict state, often for decades, and replaces the old with the new. The attraction of the terrain vague is particularly evident in movies. Marcel Carné's Terrain vague (1960), Michelangelo Antonioni's Red Desert (1964), Jean-Luc Godard's Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle (1967) or Andrei Tarkov-sky's Stalker (1979) come to mind. Solà-Morales noted that the French word vague could be translated as either 'void', 'uncertain' or 'wave', and that the word terrain connoted a more urban quality than the English 'land'. The meaning of the term, then, wasn't fixed and supported both positive and negative connotations. It evoked 'void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, the expectation', and it captured the viewer emotionally.[2] Nevertheless, when Solà-Morales came around to explaining the reasons for this fascination, his interpretation was vaguely psychological; he stated that the terrain vague corresponded to the 'individual in conflict with himself'.[3] In his words: 'The enthusiasm for these vacant spaces – expectant, imprecise, fluctuating – transposed to the urban key, reflects our strangeness in front of the world, in front of the city, before ourselves.'[4] At the same time, the terrain vague embodied a promise. But he left open two questions: for whom was it a promise and who, exactly, was 'in conflict with himself'?
Solà-Morales was well aware of the ambivalent role of architecture, a practice whose 'destiny has always been colonisation, the imposing of limits, order and form'[5] and whose tendency is to destroy the cherished void by filling it in with built structures. But what Solà-Morales left out, I would argue, was the economic context. In retrospect, we can understand why he as an architect perceived the terrain vague as a promise and why he saw his contemporaries as being in conflict with themselves. During the boom years of the 1980s and early 1990s, all of Europe was a construction site. Metropolises such as Paris, London, Berlin and Barcelona were recovering from a phase of deindustrialisation and recession. The transformation of huge vacant areas like the Parc de la Villette in Paris, the Docklands in London, Potsdamer Platz in Berlin and the Parc Diagonal in Barcelona was the key issue of architectural debate. It was an eldorado for architects. The vacant lots were like gold mines, full of aesthetic and economic promise. As competitions were held, architects understood that this might be their last chance to influence the structure of the metropolis and keep it from falling into the hands of real estate developers. (The debacle of Potsdamer Platz soon revealed how legitimate the plea for architectural autonomy had been.)
The issue raised by Solà-Morales, namely that we cannot really see or depict the transformation taking place in the postindustrial era, implies that we are subject to a crisis of representation. We are aware that the way we see, speak and move is affected by the occurring change, but still it is difficult to grasp these phenomena by concepts and images. We are led to mistrust our perception. What we see is no longer what we see, as it had been back in the days of, say, Minimalism in the 1960s.[6] The positivism that still prevailed in that period has given way to scepticism. Nothing in the realm of the visual can be taken for granted. Many artists have dealt and are still dealing with this topic and have sharpened our senses for the various aspects of urban transformation; just think of Robert Smithson's Entropic Landscape (1970), Gordon Matta-Clark's building cuts such as Bronx Floors (1972–1973), Absalon's Cellules (1991–1994) and Rachel Whiteread's Ghost (1990), a plaster sculpture cast from the inside of a demolished Victorian house. That artists express such interest in urban transformation does not mean that the boundaries between art and architecture 'blur', as we often hear – in fact the two disciplines were rarely more distanced than in the second half of the 20th century – but that the change taking place can more easily be located in the realm of architecture than elsewhere.

Dysfunctional spaces
There is no such thing as a terrain vague in Basel, where Eric Hattan lives, nor in Switzerland in general. Switzerland has almost no heavy industry and it was not struck by deindustrialisation like

most other industrialised nations in the second half of the 20th century. Instead Basel is a hub of the pharmaceutical industry, and whenever a building is demolished, a new one rises up immediately. The economic pressure on the ground is simply too large to allow such a thing as a non-used area. In consequence, the temporal dimension, which the terrain vague embodies – comparable to a ruin in that it allows us to perceive the struggle between natural processes of time and the intention of humans to build things that withstand time – exists only latently. (Changes over time can seldom be perceived because there are few places that actually are left to age; foreign observers are often astonished that in Swiss cities there are so few traces of passing time, hardly any cracks, no rust, no patina.) Hattan articulated this latency in the installation C.I.P. (Chantier interdit au public) (1987), where the actual process of construction – and by suggestion of transformation in general – was barred from view: the public had no right to access the construction site. It was left standing in front of a wall hiding the change going on behind it. Even more radical was Hattan's decision to close off an entire exhibition space, attitudes in Geneva, by filling the window openings with bricks (Entre, 1994). Visitors were confronted with a space virtually gone blind. The only entrance was via the toilet, where the artist had inserted a new door.

In search for a terrain vague, Hattan regularly leaves Basel and traces it elsewhere. For instance in the lonely landscape of Iceland in the exhibition Schnee bis im Mai (2011). Or in guise of a Grand Tour to the terrain vague under the title Tour de FFF (FracFranceForce) (2013), a road trip he organised with an assistant visiting all the Fonds Regional d'Art Contemporain in France. Their route led them through the countryside, the suburbs, small towns and infrastructural areas usually overlooked by the cultural system of France that is highly centralised and entirely focused on Paris. But usually, Hattan does not have to travel far. Rather, he discovers the terrain vague in the details of his immediate surroundings, in the thickness of an apartment wall, the content of an old cupboard, a heap of trash on the street. What a derelict industrial site might be to a photographer such as Manolo Laguillo, for Hattan is the architectural interior, the immediate environments of the human body. And indeed, the objects that had accumulated in his parents' house during his childhood and youth along with the belongings he had subsequently collected, later became the content of an exhibition at the Helmhaus Zürich in 1990. Like the zones that Solà-Morales described in his essay, the accumulation of objects in cupboards, cellars and attics contain traces of the passing of time.

Thus Hattan's art is dealing with the question of how the subject is related to its immediate environment. Many of his installations and videos ask how the human body is corresponding to clothes, furniture, rooms or streets. La Chambre (1990) is an architectural interior mostly made out of tissue. The material symbolises the proximity of clothing and architecture – both are textures, which protect the human body. But wrapping the objects with tissue also renders them more abstract; it separates the subject from the environment rather than connecting it to its surroundings. Nothing seems to be stable or reliable. The combination of metal, wood and tissue makes the viewer feel the volatility and instability of the environment. What is intended to be a protection and a shelter turns against the subject, literally becoming un-homely – unheimlich – in the sense of Sigmund Freud. The situation resembles that of a tent, although the process of camping here becomes permanent.

In the same year as La Chambre, Hattan exhibited the installation Daheim. The title is both an adverb, namely 'being at home' or 'being in one's homeland', and a noun, namely 'home' or 'house'. What should provide identity to its occupant, however, turns against the subject. The plywood and plaster structure is formally refined – following the look of a minimalist sculpture – but completely dysfunctional. The space is too small, the windows too high or low, the doors too narrow to be used. A monitor inside the built structure displays the images of a camera focusing on the door handle at the entrance of the exhibition space. It would allow the imaginary occupant to know if someone entered the space, but because it only catches a detail of the door it remains useless as a surveillance camera.

A performative impulse runs through these projects. Hattan does not consider space as a neutral, or static, envelope in which objects are deposed, but rather as a dynamic process constantly transforming – very much in the sense of Henri Lefebvre's thoughts in his seminal book La production de l'espace (1974). Hattan's art deals with the impossibility to completely define and confine a space. His scepticism towards a possibility to distinguish between 'inside' and 'outside' is exemplified in the ongoing video series Unplugged (2005–). The videos depict the artist reversing objects, such as packages. The 'plop' of the inverted plastic container, for instance, provides pleasure because it demonstrates that situations we take for granted and finite could also be different, in other words, that decisions are reversible. Unplugged also makes clear that as an artist Hattan – unlike the photographers mentioned by Solà-Morales – does not remain at a distance from his objects. Very often his hands are visible, manipulating the artifacts. The tactile sense, we learn, is as important as

the sense of vision. When the artist himself appears with a camera, it is usually handheld, pressed against his eye, a mediator between the human body and its surroundings rather than a device that distances the objects. Hattan leads the viewer closely to the point where transformation takes place and affects the subject, to a miniature terrain vague, so to speak.

Volatile home
The dysfunctional home has been a popular motif in art since the 1970s. From Gordon Matta-Clark's Splitting (1974) to Vito Acconci's Bad Dream House (1984) to Monika Sosnowska's 1:1 in the Polish Pavilion of the Venice Biennale 2007, there is a long tradition of uninhabitable houses. Hattan's art can be seen in this context, as immediately becomes obvious in his photo series Niemand ist mehr da, produced in an abandoned block of flats in Paris in 1999, only a few days before it was demolished. And Hattan is particularly interested in the volatility and ephemeral nature of the home. Not surprisingly, one of his preferred objects is the caravan, the mobile home. We can find it in several installations, for instance in Caravane (1998) in Paris, where it is perforated by a street lamp. This gesture turns the mobile home immobile and makes it dysfunctional. The uncertainty expressed by this paradoxical location is enhanced if viewers or passers-by approach to look inside: the artist has placed a miniature interior in front of the spy hole in the door. The curious observer who expects to discover the street lamp inside the caravan will not find it. What should be there is not there, knowing and seeing differ. No solution is offered to this crisis of representation.
A comparable deception of the eye took place in the installation Zwillingszimmer (1996) in the Künstlerhaus Bethanien. The lofts of this artist-in-residency programme, which is housed in a former hospital in Berlin-Kreuzberg, are well known for the double columns that stand in the centre of the space. Hattan inserted two small rooms into the loft. When looking through the door, one of these rooms showed a bed penetrated by a column while the other bedroom had no column. Again, like a magician, the artist made the architecture mysteriously disappear.
The play with scales, the use of miniature models and an affinity for housing has proved a fruitful combination in Hattan's art since the 1990s. As outlined above, these means offer a method to deal with the crisis of representation, instead of a reflection on architecture itself. For architecture, the miniature model is never a problem, but a tool to design reality. Hattan, on the other hand, uses it to let collide different sizes and different ways of perception. Inside (1993) opens onto a miniature proscenium stage, which is penetrated by parts of a male body. (Since the artist without exception uses his own body when he is performing in front of the camera, we can assume that it is Hattan posing.) The bent leg, part of an arm and fist and part of the chin are visible. As if Gulliver was trying to entertain a Lilliput audience, the artist is literally stuck in the frame, producing a grotesque anthropomorphic composition.
If I had to select an emblem for Hattan's work, I would take the motif of the mattress stemmed against the ceiling. I consider it emblematic because it combines several artistic questions raised by Hattan. What usually lies on the floor or on a bed, to support our body, is now held in place by some poles, tucked against the ceiling. Does it mimic architecture? Or does it it a play with our perception, because after looking at the ceiling for a while we start to ask ourselves if we are looking upwards from down below, or actually downwards from high up? Is the mattress no longer useful? Or does it help support the ceiling – like a capital on a Doric column, like Atlas bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders? Do we sympathise with the effort of holding the mattress high above our heads, because of the anthropomorphic aspect, because it could be us, squeezed between the necessity to hold things together, to perform, yet also tired and waiting for relaxation?
Like Solà-Morales was aware of the ambivalence of architecture to both open up and colonise space, Hattan is aware of the ambivalence of art to both complicate and simplify life. His scepticism towards abstractions, generalisations and definitions runs through his entire oeuvre and his writings. It is not only evident in the friction between the human body and its environment, but also between the individual imagination and the generalising system of language. This might explain why the artist is so reluctant to publish a standard biography, because it would again be a simplification of an immensely complex phenomenon. Instead of a biography, in his catalogue Ideeavoir from 2003 I discovered a list of places he had slept away from home during the time from his birth to his 40th birthday.7 I learned that he had lived 14,723 nights and out of these had woken up 346 times outside his home. There had been stays with relatives and friends, at summer camps, the army and night flights. Sometimes the location was unclear, sometimes not understandable for a reader not familiar with Switzerland and the Swiss art world. (I could not help following the list like a detective and trying to put together the puzzle of the artist's biography, figuring out mutual acquaintances or parallels to my own biography. I did in fact discover that as a child I had a tonsillectomy in the same hospital that Hattan was born in.) But in

the end such tabulations will not allow us to draw conclusions on decisive moments in his career, on temporal highlights. Although the rule was to list the exceptional (waking up elsewhere rather than at home), it is impossible to trace special events.

The list is comparable to a map, a spatial sequence. Its focus, oscillating between the large scale of the urban and the small scale of housing is typical for an architectural approach. The biography turns into an evocation of spaces that the artist has been occupying and sharing over the decades. As a reader, I am compelled to imagine the movements of the artist through the built environment, the contrast between the alienating spaces in foreign cities and the privacy in the spaces of relatives and friends. I recall the distinction between 'house' and 'home', between the role of providing shelter and the capacity to make one feel at home that is crucial for architectural practice.

How, then, can we combine the themes of the terrain vague, dysfunctional spaces and the volatile home? The question is not easy to answer. They stand at the core of much contemporary debate about urbanism. The fascination of many of today's architects in, say, informal housing and slum architecture is revealing of a profound discomfort with the current trend in urbanism and architecture, namely the tendency to segregate, gentrify, colonise space, in other words to privatise what is supposed to be a public or common good. Many architects and planners are aware of the problems that arise from the exploitation of the common goods and the urge to maximise profitability. They are looking for more flexible and inclusive ways of organising space. Social mixture, difference in scale and respect to the dimension of history are among the concepts that promise a remedy to the current homogenisation of space. There is much that we can learn from the practice of Hattan, he is mapping, but not colonising the terrain vague. With him, it is in good hands.

1 Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, 'Terrain vague', in Anyplace, ed. Cynthia C. Davidson, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995, pp, 118–123. quote p. 119. 2 Ibid., p. 120. 3 Ibid., p. 122. 4 Ibid. 5 Ibid. 6 'What you see is what you see', is a statement by Frank Stella from 'Questions to Stella and Judd', interview by Bruce Glaser, ed. Lucy Lippard (Art News, September 1966), in Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. Gregory Battcock, Oakland: University of California Press, pp. 148–164, quote p. 158. 7 'N.T.' in Eric Hattan: Ideeavoir, ed. Sabine Schaschl-Cooper, Muttenz: Kunsthaus Baselland, 2003, n.p.