

Pulheim, Johannisstrasse 14

Barbara von Flüe

“No Man’s Land—that’s where Schorsch lit his homemade rocket and Anne was given her first kiss. No Man’s Land does not exist, at least not in any decently planned city. No Man’s Land is a product of planning. Without planning, there is no No Man’s Land. . . . No Man’s Land is the blank space between the city proper and its oversized, tailor-made ‘planning suit.’ All of us are grateful to it for that, and adolescents especially.”¹

In the color photograph, the situation encountered develops a surreal effect: there is a spherical bush in the center of the image. It captures our attention immediately, because it constitutes the endpoint of a garden fence that leads into the picture and lends the composition geometric rigor. The fence runs through the middle of an asymmetrical green area, which is bordered to the left by buildings of varying character. The boundary to the right and the front sides consist of parking spaces. The cars parked there nestle up against the green area in an ornamental fashion—as if they had assembled there to lend the area a proper frame. The background of the photograph is hermetically sealed off by a stereotypical new building whose numerous “seeing” windows radiate something threatening. At first glance, the green area itself seems to be vacant—absence is the term that comes to mind, probably due to the razor-sharp, clear edge that borders the adjacent brick building and prompts one to think about the building that once stood here. In one place there is now a small shed that radiates a certain majesty in the frontality of the photograph. Upon closer examination, inconsistencies strike the eye: what might the forlorn streetlamp standing between the fence and the parking spaces, which seems to have been taken from a painting by Magritte, have once illuminated? How can one explain the narrow strip with a second round bush that asserts itself between the green area and the guardrail?

We are in the middle of Pulheim, Johannisstrasse 14. That we are aware of the situation encountered in its complexity is due to the above-mentioned photograph—as users of public space we would have passed by it, lost in our

thoughts. What Walter Benjamin so nicely formulated in his “Brief History of Photography” becomes apparent here: only photography can show us the unconscious aspects of our vision.² Its power of abstraction shifts familiar hierarchies—what is supposedly secondary gains center stage, the familiar becomes foreign, acquires something awkward that places itself in the way of practiced ways of seeing. The photograph in question stems from Eric Hattan—artist, researcher, amateur craftsman, tinkerer, and discoverer. He came across this “postmodern landscape”³ during his rambles through Pulheim; he did not invent it, he discovered it—a differentiation that will be returned to later. And he captured the illogical arrangement of its details, which reveals itself as being the interpenetration of urban infrastructure and rural structures, in this photographic sketch. Like many small urban agglomerations, Pulheim is a district that was created in 1975 as the result of the municipal reorganization of the four once independent communities of Brauweiler, Pulheim, Sinnersdorf, and Stommeln. The geographic assertion of urban and rural fragments that are typical of what the sociologist Lucius Burckhardt calls “new urban/rural spillover zone[s]” becomes palpable here: “The conglomerate of newly built housing estates, lots standing empty owing to speculation, abandoned commercial sites, and the scattered vestiges of farmers’ existence amounts to a ‘wasteland,’ metaphorically speaking; to an illogical wasteland that leaves us in the lurch when it comes to interpreting what we see.”⁴ The collage of relics from different times and uses found here is not the result of deliberate urban planning but is a situation that came about of its own accord over time. It is precisely for this reason that it interests Eric Hattan: sculptural forces are at work in this ensemble behind which there is no artistic intention whatsoever. Instead, they are the result of multilayered, never-ending social processes: urban development as testimony to countless decisions, norms, and financing methods that influence social and urban coexistence.

Eric Hattan is especially interested in sculptural situations of this kind, perhaps and precisely because these fragile conglomerates say something about people’s social, political, and cultural actions. For his work he makes use of a method that was developed in the fifties by the Situationists: Eric Hattan is initially a stroller. He appropriates the experimental mode of behavior developed by the Situationists, “*dérive*,” drifting or aimless rambling, for the purpose of exploring the urban landscape.⁵ “*Dérive*” is walking without a goal; it is roaming about, moving,

collecting things and recording situations one comes across on the street, getting into a subway, the next-best bus in order to get out somewhere. “Dérive” is abandoning the customary reasons for getting from A to B; it is paying attention to the terrain, its vegetation, the animals, the objects people have left behind. While it used to be that it was above all a video camera that accompanied Hattan on such walks and focused or even replaced his gaze, today he uses a camera, which is used not only in the sense of a (memory) sketch but also to heighten his own perception. Eric Hattan’s approach combines the acumen of the pathfinder and discoverer with the inquiring artist’s playful eagerness to experiment, and it also always involves a self-reflective element, which distinguishes the “strollologist” as characterized by Burckhardt: “That which we call strollology must therefore strive to simultaneously identify not only our modes of perception per se but also how these are determined, for only then will it be possible to arrive at new and unusual judgments on matters long since known. . . . Strollology is hence a tool with which previously unseen parts of the environment can be made visible as well as an effective means of criticizing conventional perception itself.”⁶

For Eric Hattan, the photographs produced in Pulheim were not sufficient to “make visible” the conglomerate he discovered; rather, they were conducive to his research and do not claim to be autonomous works of art. In order to shift the situation he came upon into the field of perception and thus into the consciousness of urban residents, Eric Hattan draws on an artistic strategy that characterizes not only his site-specific projects but his sculptural oeuvre as well: he operates with the least intervention as possible—dislocation—for the purpose of making the situation aesthetically understandable in the first place. “I see something and react to it. What I see prompts me to do something with it. I’m not concerned with reinvention, with taking action; I react to situations and circumstances as I come upon them. It’s about questioning by means of rethinking, about adding something to and taking something away from what exists.”⁷

For Pulheim, Hattan brought in Oliver Senn, a friend of his who is a drummer and architect, to join him in staging the site. In order to present the situation, to literally exhibit it, the two artists chose two complementary interventions: on the one hand, they intervened in the existing ensemble acoustically; they decided on the existing shed and transformed it into a “rock shed.” Senn recorded nine very different drum solos in his practice room and

installed them in the shed with the aid of an amplifier and speakers. The equipment is programmed in such a way that the sound files are selected by a random generator and played back daily between 11:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. Both the sequence of the individual files as well as the duration of the breaks between the solos are left to chance, so that it can by all means happen that the expectant visitor has to wait for several hours until he or she can enjoy a short solo. At one point, however, it is not the visitor but unsuspecting passers-by who are more central to the work: they are surprised by acoustic signals that cause them to listen attentively and experience the situation from an altered point of view.

The second intervention, last spectacular than the first but no less important for understanding the work, is the mild renovation of the shed by Eric Hattan and Oliver Senn. The new roof out of red corrugated sheet metal not only protects the speakers that have been placed in the shed from the elements, but also develops a signal effect that, along with the bright green door, calls to mind stereotypical images of a backyard shed. They reinforced the shed's structures using tools and material from a hardware store and lightly smoothed out and polished its appearance. The two artists' approach corresponds exactly with that of the bricoleur, who with the aid of the materials and tools available to him putters around on an object, renewing and patching it according to the principle of the least intervention.⁸ There is more than childlike pragmatism behind this approach, for those who want to understand how a situation evolved or the life of an object find adequate access by way of immersing themselves in handicraft work. The loving renovation can thus also be understood as an opportunity to approach the existing situation, to rescue the object in the first place before it can be staged.

Both interventions developed during the artists' involvement with the site and lead to a minimal dislocation that tends to be invisible, but whose impact is crucial. Hattan and Senn use materials whose value and narrative quality integrate themselves into the situation encountered: the wood is cheap; the soundtrack was not recorded in a studio but in Senn's practice room. The drum solo is equivalent to a form of retelling a story using acoustic means: those who pass by will initially perceive the sound as being consistent, as the terrain of the improvised wasteland could belong to the youths who act out a bit of personal freedom in the purposeless and undisciplined no man's land.

At second glance, one might be surprised by the confidence of the drummer, who, based on his musical skills, one suspects to belong to an older generation. The size of the shed may also be irritating, for how, for God's sake, can a drum set fit into it? And how did this rocked out shed come to have such a new, bright red roof? The means used are simple, the dislocations minimal but precise. They operate against the background of the familiar and yet border on the unfamiliar and the alien; they extend the terrain into the realm of the imaginary and thus sharpen our view of reality. We are called on to examine our perception; we see the yellow flowers for the first time; we see the thistles, the shrubs, and the bushes; we wonder at the blossoming lilac and the young trees that are reclaiming their terrain. We also ask ourselves for the first time why this magical garden is a good one meter lower than the adjacent street. We attempt not "only" to take in the existing constellation of heterogeneous details, but also to understand it aesthetically.

The acoustic intervention's lack of dramaturgy now comes into play, an aspect that in general plays a role in the creative work of Eric Hattan. The timing and the sequence of the individual solos not only evade the artist's access, neither can they be influenced by the listener and viewer. And what is more: the underlying principle of chance is only recognizable if one stays at Johannisstrasse 14 for an entire day. What this means for passers-by is that they can never be entirely sure whether they, at the moment they decide to move on, will miss the climax. The work's potential lies in this uncertainty, in this (also mischievous) play with the supply and denial of information, because it raises the expectations of curious passers-by, stimulating their senses and shifting them into their archaic past, so to speak, like an animal lying in waiting. The intervention by Eric Hattan and Oliver Senn is neither a product nor a solution, to paraphrase Hattan. It first and foremost facilitates an experience; it creates an "(immaterial) intensity,"⁹ leads to a temporary charging of a situation that in its poetic quality has existed for a long time.

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¹ Lucius Burckhardt (1980), “No Man’s Land,” in id., *Why Is Landscape Beautiful? The Science of Strollology*, ed. Markus Ritter and Martin Schmitz, trans. Jill Denton (Berlin, 2006), pp. 126–27.

² Walter Benjamin (1931), “Brief History of Photography,” in id., *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. J. A. Underwood (London, 2009), pp. 172–192, esp. pp. 176f.

³ Lucius Burckhardt (1998), “Wasteland As Context: Is There Any Such Thing as the Postmodern Landscape?” in Burckhardt 2006 (see note 1), pp. 87–101, esp. p. 94.

⁴ Both quotes *ibid.*, p. 93. Lucius Burckhardt founded so-called strollology in the eighties. As professor for the socioeconomics of urban systems at the Gesamthochschule in Kassel, he carried out numerous projects with his students (prospective urban planners, designers, and architects) for the purpose of raising their awareness for a different understanding of landscape and space.

⁵ Cf. Guy Debord, “Theory of the Dérive,” in Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, 2006), pp. 62–65.

⁶ Lucius Burckhardt (1995), “The Science of Strollology,” in Burckhardt 2006 (see note 1), pp. 231–66, esp. pp. 233, 238.

⁷ Eric Hattan, translated from and cited in Simon Baur, “Eric Hattan: Diskurse über das Umordnen,” *Künstler—Kritisches Lexikon der Gegenwartskunst* 96, no. 25 (4th Quarter 2011), p. 3. Michael Asher used the term “dislocation” to describe his own artistic practice. There are similarities between Eric Hattan’s mode of thought and approach and those of Michael Asher.

⁸ Here I adopt Claude Lévi-Strauss’s often-cited distinction between bricoleur and engineer: while the engineer approaches his work in a methodical and rational way and uses special tools, the bricoleur takes anything that falls into his hands and uses it as a tool for his own purposes. Lévi-Strauss uses this distinction to characterize two different approaches to dealing with nature, culture, and myth. Cf. Martin Küster, “Bricolage/Bricoleur,” in Ansgar Nünning, ed., *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 1998), p. 59.

⁹ “I understand art as work on change. It concerns neither products nor solutions, but rather (immaterial) intensity, thus experience, to live oneself and not be lived or other-directed.” Eric Hattan, cited in Baur 2011 (see note 7), p. 1.
