

Regenerate Art

Anfang 2011 veröffentlichte Dave Bing, der damalige Bürgermeister von Detroit, auf Twitter eine Initiative zur umfassenden Sanierung der Stadt – das »Detroit Works Project«. Ein

zwischen Stadtplanern und Unternehmen: So macht der Bürgermeister von Detroit im Film einen Deal mit einer Firma, durch den die hochverschuldete Polizei der Stadt finanziert werden soll. Im wirklichen Leben haben Anfang dieses Jahres einige Unternehmer aus Detroit mit der dortigen Polizei Leasingverträge über 25 neue Wagen abgeschlossen. Eingefädelt hatte dieses Geschäft noch Dave Bing. So wie die fiktive Delta City, die im Film radiesische Idealstadt eines Erscheinung tritt, erinnert an den Planungen für die Stadterweiterung »Detroit Future City« (wofür das Projekt aufging).

Wie erscheint *RoboCop* symptomatisch für die post-industrielle Stadt, die ihre ehemals wichtiger Produktionsstandort und jetzt versucht, sich neu zu erfinden? In der RoboCop-Statue, die Maschine, die von einem Kontrakt und die Straßen von Detroit ist genau der richtige Repräsentationsbild für die konkreten Umstände. Aber wie kann Kunst Raum auf den jeweiligen Kontext entwickelt wurde, reagieren, ihre Wirkung – wie im Falle der Statue – metaphorisch in Erschei-

Statue. Vielen Dank für den Vorschlag.«

Imagination Station in Detroit tätig ist, hat die Consumer Products, einer Firma, die sich mit und nach dem fiktiven Unternehmen im Film *RoboCop* versprochen eine Aufstockung des Budgets, wenn die Durch seine Spende konnten das selbstgesteckte Ziel aufgebracht werden.

Wigan, Chrysler Group, Ford Motor Company, General Corporation und Platinum Equity LLC.

Regenerate Art

In early 2011 the former mayor of Detroit Dave Bing was publicizing a citywide redevelopment initiative called Detroit Works Project on Twitter. One commenter responded by suggesting a statue of RoboCop, an idea that Bing politely (yet curtly) dismissed.¹ But not before the idea went viral, eventually resulting in a Kickstarter campaign that successfully fundraised more than the projected cost of realizing the proposal.² Why did this idea gain such traction though, considering the original 1987 film is a satire of Reagan-era corporate politics, gentrification and privatization? Given the context of this film, RoboCop seems an unlikely ambassador for Detroit, even in regard to other fiction-based statues such as the Rocky Balboa statue in Philadelphia, that have come to symbolize the cities where these characters were based.

Paradoxically, one can also see how Detroit has started to resemble the fictional near-future city as portrayed in *RoboCop*. For example, the relationship between urban planning and business are conspicuous in real world examples today. In the film the mayor of Detroit makes a deal with a corporation to bankroll the city's cash-strapped police department, while earlier this year several businesses leased the force a squad of 25 new

cars in a deal formerly brokered by Bing.³ Even the image of the fictional Delta City - a proposed company-run Elysian in *RoboCop* - sounds not unlike the Future City (which evolved out of the Detroit Works Project) currently being suggested as part of Detroit's new blueprint.

In a sense, RoboCop is not without merit a symbol for a post-industrial city struggling to regenerate after a healthy period of production. So perhaps the image of a corporate-sponsored machine cleaning up the streets of Detroit can be seen as an apt heroic effigy, in that it is a profound reflection of its surroundings. How then might public art truly respond to the specific contexts for which it is proposed, if the regenerative potential, as heralded by this statue for instance, can be considered metaphorically? 'Regenerate Art' hypothesizes on this as a theme, through public art proposals, satirical reflections and unmade commissions, which confront either the regeneration projects for which they were conceived, or propose reflective responses to the commissioning of public art.

The parallels between the fictional and its real-world counterparts in Scott King's *Anish and Antony Take Afghanistan*, for example, are

¹'There are not any plans to erect a statue to Robocop. Thank you for the suggestion.'

² Brandon Walley of the Detroit-based non-profit Imagination Station started the campaign to fund the proposal. This in turn caught the attention of Pete Hottelet from Omni Consumer Products, a legitimate firm that specialises in defictionalisation and reverse-branding named after the fictional corporation in Robocop, who offered to match fund it if it raised \$25,000. Bolstered by Hottelet's donation the campaign surpassed its \$50,000 target figure and successfully raised \$67,436 in total.

³ The eight donors were Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, Chrysler Group, Ford Motor Company, General Motors, Quicken Loans, The Kresge Foundation, Penske Corporation, and Platinum Equity LLC.

⁴ *Anish Kapoor's Orbit tower: the mother of all helter-skelters*. This article was published on the Guardian website at 20.31 BST on Saturday 5 May 2012. A version appeared on p14 of the The New Review section of the Observer on Sunday 6 May 2012. It was last modified at 20.41 BST on Tuesday 19 August 2014.

trenchant; with global leaders standing in for city officials, commissioning bodies and local developers, and a region replaced by conflict in the Middle East. While its message reads in a similar vein to that of preemptive dystopic fiction - the narrative arc is a vicious loop resulting in a reverse-9/11 - King's satirical take on artistic instrumentalisation can be seen in relation to Kapoor's winning public art proposal - a gigantic sculpture/viewing platform hybrid for the Olympic site in the East End of London. King may exaggerate the extent to which the artists are blind sighted by ambition, yet in reality, Kapoor's own aspirations were also seemingly driven by scale, un-ironically citing the Eiffel Tower, Tatlin's tower and even the Tower of Babel as references.⁴ In one of the panels from *Anish and Antony Take Afghanistan*, Kapoor can quite literally be seen (orbiting) above the earth, building a similar version of the *ArcelorMittal Orbit* in space. Back on the ground however, the artist's intent thinly-veiled a merger between urban planning and big business, as the majority of the structure's funding was donated by Indian steel magnate and Britain's richest man, Lakshmi Mittal, following a tête-à-tête with Boris Johnson, the mayor of London.⁵ Most obviously, its title, *ArcelorMittal Orbit*, is flagrantly prefixed with the company name.

In this case, the form that public art takes reflects less its surroundings, than the corporate dealing and political narcissism that

underpinned its realization. While the motivations behind *ArcelorMittal Orbit* determined the outcome of the proposed structure, the aesthetics of Lukas Duwenhögger's competition submission were questionable within the context of a memorialising object. His submission, a tower with a gigantic teapot on top, was conceived for a public memorial to commemorate the persecuted homosexuals of National Socialism in Berlin. 'To honor the dead properly, we were told, we must surrender our democratic right to critical speech and subjugate ourselves to official discourses of truth', wrote Rosalyn Deutsche recently in her analysis of the completed National September 11 Memorial Museum in New York City.⁶ Duwenhögger's proposal could be thought of in similar terms. After it was initially rejected, the artist remarked that the apprehension of the commissioning body towards his proposal contradicted some of the very sensibilities of the people they wished to commemorate.⁷ Perhaps this is because *The Celestial Teapot* responds to what Roger Cook identifies as an absurdity that *disturbs*.⁸ While traditionally speaking, it displays no obvious outward appearance of being a memorial, Cook considers a crucial trait in Duwenhögger's proposal - that of humour and its deployment as a serious judgment. 'Homosexuals have often responded to oppression with humour; this is at the root of the sensibility known as 'camp'', writes Cook. The artist's 'teapot is far too effusive, beautiful and self-evident to succeed

⁵ Johnson famously approached Mittal in a public toilet at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2009. The world's largest steelmaking company committed up to £19.6 million of the £22.7 million cost of building the structure.

⁶ Rosalyn Deutsche, *The Whole Truth*, Artforum, September 2014

⁷ 'The proposal was rejected. Lukas made the observation in the aftermath that despite the liberal establishment's desire to be seen to be supporting the gay community, they nevertheless are unable to accept the queer, the camp and the other, and in a sense wish to erase the very characteristics which were so obviously objectionable to the Nazi regime.' Taken from notes on the work by Cabinet Gallery, 2007

⁸ Roger Cook, *Lukas Duwenhögger: [Homosexual] Signs*, Afterall 31 Autumn/Winter 2012

as a proposal for an architectural challenge occupying the high moral ground of an anti-fascist monument', making the impossibility of Duwenhögger's idea perhaps worthy of protection in itself.⁹

While its integrity maybe an efficacious quality of Duwenhögger's artwork, his proposal also shows how, conceptually-speaking, the unrealisation of public art raises moral issues that the regenerative prerequisite of commissioning sometimes has difficulty reconciling with. Similarly, although on the receiving end of a commission, Joanna Rajkowska's *The Peterborough Child* is as much about personal healing and rejuvenation as it is about a geographical, historical site. A fabricated archeological excavation of a burial place containing the skeleton of a small child, the artist's project was withdrawn involuntarily at its penultimate stage due to religious objections from members of the resident Islamic community. Because of these outspoken remarks, which were in fact extraneous, the town's local authorities swiftly bypassed their own regulations in order to effectively cease any continuation of the project. However, Rajkowska suspects there having been, at least in part, a legitimate reason behind the cancellation. Peterborough has a high infant mortality rate, and her proposal probably touched a very real nerve in the eyes of the local authorities. Yet the emotional honesty in her retelling of the process sits in

stark contrast to the response of the local authorities; firstly the failure to provide the artist with tangible reasoning for the cancellation of her project,¹⁰ and secondly not constructively responding to the repressed social anxiety revealed through its very proposition.

In this respect - as with Duwenhögger, who continued developing *The Celestial Teapot* over several years - the unfamiliar proposal becomes a starting point for artistic production. Speaking about *The Peterborough Child* after the project was cancelled, Rajkowska raises an important point in that, 'this is actually the moment where real negotiation and participation should start.'¹¹ The silencing of the work before it had entered the public realm, caused the artist to realize that her proposal could in fact be the beginning of a public work of a different kind; as a catalyst towards restructuring the manner in which the project might be negotiated by questioning the hierarchical procedures and power of political and religious representations. By transferring the story of *The Peterborough Child* to the fictionalised form of an animated film - the work that Rajkowska produced from her proposal, which is shown in the exhibition - the artist is able to analyze the circumstances around the project in order to create a form of 'chakra - a place of focused, accumulated energy'¹² which had been formally denied to her. Yet its unrealisation also represents a negotiation between an artwork

⁹ Taken from a conversation with Martin McGoewn, who expressed his personal interpretation of Georges Bataille's writing on the impossible in regard to Duwenhögger's proposal.

¹⁰ 'There is no doubt, however, that certain statements were made: "Peterborough is not ready for this work, or any work of this kind" and: "This commission would damage future commissions, as well as art happening now in the city (driven by a fear of the media response)". There was also the argument that there was "no other contemporary art like it out there in the public domain in the UK."' Joanna Rajkowska, Chapter 16. *The Peterborough Child, Where the Beast is Buried*, Zero Books, 2013.

¹¹ Interviewed by Alessandra Ferrini, <http://mnemoscape.wordpress.com/2013/09/16/joanna-rajkowska-interview/>

¹² Joanna Rajkowska, Chapter 16. *The Peterborough Child, Where the Beast is Buried*, Zero Books, 2013

and a specific context as a point of reflection, bringing to mind Josephine Berry Slater and Anthony Iles' rhetorical question that, 'should we not rather consider aesthetic experiments in terms of tensions they establish with their contexts and the forces which attempt to direct them?'¹³

While Rajkowska's film arose out of the events surrounding the cancellation of *The Peterborough Child*, Chris Evans becomes an instigator, agent or consultant as a starting point in his practice, whether proposing a sculpture park in Estonia or offering a British Socialist newspaper a free redesign. What might appear to be incongruous pairings or even absurd propositions in the works *Radical Loyalty* and *Morning Star Rebranded*, can in fact be considered as logically reconciling ideology and form through commissioning or rebranding strategies. Elsewhere, several artworks in 'Regenerate Art' also reverse the top-down structure, often humorously, by adopting the fictitious viewpoint of a commissioner, such as Scott King, or through considering it as an abstract concept. For example, in making their work, Alan Kane & Simon Periton considered from a distance public art as a genre to be subverted,¹⁴ deliberately using the proposal as a means to deflect the slow processes that normally determine the realization of art in the public realm, by proposing a series of unrealistic, renegade public art works.

What these and all the projects in the exhibition show is a mirroring of applied meanings of regeneration in public art. Effectively, the artists in 'Regenerate Art' turn the public art proposal - whether rejected, unsolicited or a hypothetical reflection - into a new work or analysis of their public and political contexts. Instead of becoming lost or unconsidered, they are the beginnings for works that offer affirmative reflections of urban regeneration, cultural healing, ideology and form. Perhaps policy makers could benefit from considering unrealized, speculative, or even absurd proposals as a way of seeing an alternative reality to the current governance of public space.

Whether or not intentionally, the incitement of the proposed RoboCop statue shows, albeit aided by the alternative economies provided by the Internet, how an idea can circumnavigate top-down public art commissioning. While it may be excessive to say that this is public art that comes from a *public* (often invisible or imagined whenever the term is evoked), it could be thought of as an unlikely example of an artistic intervention in an early stage of regeneration. Yet the image of RoboCop is absurdly profound, as it is also, of itself, a monument to regeneration.

Saim Demircan

¹³ Josephine Berry Slater and Anthony Iles, *No Room To Move: Radical Art and the Regenerate City*, Mute Publishing, 2012

¹⁴ Interview with Alan Kane & Simon Periton by Saim Demircan, p.11

In the comic strip *Anish and Antony Take Afghanistan*, Scott King satirizes the ambitions of British artists Antony Gormley and Anish Kapoor - well known for their monumental sculpture - in an absurd scenario where the United Nations send both artists, in militaristic fashion, abroad to regenerate a devastated Afghanistan with their public artworks.

With the public support of President Hamid Karzai, their sculptures successfully pave the way for the country's (or 'New Afghanistan' as it is referred to) gentrification. Yet the surprising economic growth worries global powers, resulting in a US-engineered reverse September 11-style attack upon the country, returning it to its precondition.

Joanna Rajkowska

The Peterborough Child, 2012
Bleistift auf Papier

The Peterborough Child, 2012
Bleistift auf Papier

The Peterborough Child, 2012
Oxidierter Messingplakette

The Peterborough Child, 2014
Video, Farbe, Ton
28 Minuten

Leihgaben der Künstlerin und
Žak|Branicka Gallery, Berlin.

Die Geschichte über das nicht realisierte Projekt *The Peterborough Child* ist eine von Joanna Rajkowska überarbeitete Fassung ihrer berührenden Auseinandersetzung mit den Komplikationen eines öffentlichen Kunstprojekts für die englische Stadt Peterborough. Ihr Bericht über die nachträgliche Absage des Projekts und die Ereignisse, die sich zeitgleich in ihrem persönlichen Leben abspielten, ist in dem Buch *Where the Beast is Buried* erschienen. Ihr ursprüngliches Konzept sah eine archäologische Grabungsstätte vor, an der sich das 3.500 Jahre alte Skelett eines kleinen Mädchens befinden sollte. Damit knüpfte die

Künstlerin an die bewegte Geschichte des Ortes an, die bis ins Neolithikum zurückreicht, während sie sich gleichzeitig mit ihrer Rolle als Mutter eines Neugeborenen auseinandersetzen musste, bei dem eine seltene Form von Augenkrebs diagnostiziert worden war. Ihre Arbeit an dem Projekt war demnach von großer Angst und Sorge begleitet, die dem Werkprozess von *The Peterborough Child* neben der Thematisierung gesellschaftlicher Fragen auch spirituelle Züge verlieh.

The Peterborough Child, 2012
Pencil on paper

The Peterborough Child, 2012
Pencil on paper.

The Peterborough Child, 2012
Oxidised brass plaque

The Peterborough Child, 2014
Video, colour, sound
28 min

All works courtesy of the artist and
Žak|Branicka Gallery, Berlin.

The story of the unrealised *The Peterborough Child* has been adapted by Joanna Rajkowska from her own touchingly written account describing the process of a public art commission for the British town of Peterborough. The narrative of the project's subsequent cancellation and the concurrent events in her personal life was originally published in her book *Where the Beast is Buried*. Conceived as an archaeological dig containing the skeleton of a girl who had died 3,500 years earlier, the artist's proposal tapped into the area's rich earth history dating back to Neolithic times at a moment when the artist was comprehending her role as a mother to a newborn baby diagnosed with a rare form of eye cancer. Rajkowska's commission was inhabited by the artist's own personal fear, making the procedure of *The Peterborough Child* as much a spiritual as it was a social undertaking.