

Publishing as Critical Spatial(izing) Practice

I Intro

The aim of exploring and developing publishing as a process of site-specific “making a public”¹ that informs a “capacity to act”² and as a means for shaping communities, proposing alternative value systems and for opening new political horizons formed the basis of “Publishing Acts.” During the experimental workshop, publishing was pursued as a method for investigating contemporary and future living environments, as an interface for connecting together people with different backgrounds, as a frame for observation, research and discourse; and as a means to inform a process of connecting and re-connecting with a place by a review of its history and cultural context in a specific and conscious way. Publishing was tested in its potential as a critical spatial and spatializing practice and as a tool for instigating non-transient sociopolitical engagement.

Publishing understood in this way not only questions the common formats of public (participatory) engagement, but also purposefully counteracts prevalent notions of publishing, in which the aim of maximal coverage and monetization outranks content, allows misinformation to proliferate and thus distorts not only the media landscape but also political discourses. When we talk about “prevalent notions of publishing” we mean, for instance, the privileging of monetization; due to publishing’s generally low margins this is breeding an accelerated publishing process, which in turn advances the economic precarization of the actors involved, prohibiting critical discourse and in-depth research. Technological possibilities are primarily regarded as a means to boost profits and coverage by, for example, the integration of multiple media, always eager, nevertheless, to keep customers locked into the closed worlds of a particular application or brand. In the academic world, knowledge is shut away behind paywalls, the “judgment of [its] quality is (...) ‘outsourced’ to the brand-name of the

¹ The differentiation between “making public” and “making a public” was defined by Paul Soulellis: ‘Posting is usually “making public” but publishing is “making a public” by creating a space for the circulation of discourse.’ in: Soulellis, Paul (2015). “Making Public,” online: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-yrTRf2HjV8WNoQttAeJ9ObljWjv0w2LITDXzGPftw/edit?usp=sharing> (accessed 20 July 2017)

² Miessen, Markus and Vidokle, Anton. “Capacity to Act,” in: *Caring Culture*, ed. by Miessen, Markus and Phillips, Andrea (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011).

journal,”³ in which it is published. Preclusive sales and distribution networks (and standardized library and archive systems) are ruled and protected by the big players of the publishing industries. We also see ourselves confronted with a petrified and rigid segregation of the roles and tasks of publisher, author, editor, designer and others, resulting in a division of labor, which is ultimately – combined with the precariousness and the restricted time frames associated with publishing work – leading to an externalization of the tasks, and is preventing the efforts performed within a publishing undertaking from permeating the concerns and visions of those involved that reach beyond the mere duty of designing, writing and printing a product.

If we aim to pursue publishing as a critical practice with a transformatory potential, and as a method to open potential spaces beyond objectification and externalization, we must recognize that the prevalent notion of publishing cannot be contested nor overcome as long as it evolves within the regime of the criticized matter. Criticism from within can only result in an illusory aloofness within the affiliation to the system: “Critique seeks to limit and legitimate the very crisis under critique, instead of speculatively leave it behind.”⁴ Following this admonition we may decide to perceive publishing as a “destituent” way of thinking and acting in an Agambenian sense. A destituent approach, in brief, means, for Giorgio Agamben (according to Camillo Boano, who dialectically deduced an “inoperative architecture standing as a new manifesto for action”⁵ from Agamben’s works) a reflection and activity in opposition to the constituent power of the dominant narrative, an “action that enables us to probe the possibilities of ‘forms-of-life’ outside the governmental apparatuses and *dispositifs*.”⁶ The *dispositifs* for Agamben include anything, which has the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings.

As a substrate of the tangled universe of Agambenian thinking, this is what a destituent practice of publishing might include: it in fact acknowledges

³ Moriarty, Philipp (2017). „Addicted to the brand: the hypocrisy of the publishing academic,“ online: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/03/14/addicted-to-the-brand-the-hypocrisy-of-a-publishing-academic/> (accessed 25 August 2017)

⁴ Avanesian, Armen (Ed.). *#Akzeleration* (Berlin: Merve, 2013), p. 71–77

⁵ Boano, Camillo. *The Ethics of a Potential Urbanism: Critical encounters between Giorgio Agamben and architecture* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁶ Ibid.

that publications are always embedded in major institutional, social, economic, cultural and technological contexts (forming part of Agamben's governmental apparatuses) that have the tendency to limit the autonomy of the work; but in all activity that it performs, publication strives to be subtracted from exactly those apparatuses. Particularly from the prevalent notions of what publishing should be, from the constraint of producing object-commodities as well as from the prevailing mechanisms, roles, objectives and temporalities.

A destituent publishing practice is one, in which preconceived ideas, orientation and evaluation grids lose their binding power. It is informed and driven by immanent dis-sensus, generic disobedience directed against the totalizing (and enticing) power of established modes of perception, evaluation, tropes and aims. It rejects petrification, labelling or codification of any sort. It fosters a generic suspension of ontologies and epistemologies, and constantly aims to reconfigure its own matrix of reference – generically willing to imagine completely other strategies, processes, modes of distribution, and contents beyond what is epitomized and broadly endorsed. It thus preserves a constant definitional crisis for its own nature, and is nourished by the aim to think and act beyond the “real,” beyond what is currently embodied and materialized. Driven by these objectives a destituent publishing pursues a shape-shifting strategy just a “little bit different,” in order, on one hand, to create new forms of knowledge about the principles, preconditions, ethical implications and cognizances of publishing; and, on the other, to explore and sustain its sociopolitical potential.

II Making A Public

A publishing like the one illustrated above is preceded by the recognition of publications and publishing as frames rather than containers, harnessing the quality of the publishing sphere as a “social nexus:”⁷ It notably draws from publications' capacity as institutionalizing or social objects able to instigate “rhetorically active spheres embedded in and constructed out of discourse,”⁸ in the words of Paul Soulellis. He finds it irrelevant whether the public is created for the circulation of discourse in order to make a publication or by the publication itself.

He furthermore proposes a differentiation between “making public” and

⁷ Gilbert, Annette (Ed.). *Publishing as Artistic Practice* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), p. 26

⁸ Ibid.

“making a public:” “Posting is usually ‘making public’ but publishing is ‘making a public’ by creating a space for the circulation of discourse.”⁹ Soullelis’ statement draws from the insight that the too frequent simplistic perception of publishing as an act of “making public” does not take it into consideration that notions of public and private are increasingly vague, controversial spheres, bluntly presuming the existence of an indisputable public that can be addressed as a social totality. A publishing framed in this manner is prone to favor a broad, nondirectional, unfiltered proliferation of information. Soullelis acknowledges that an audience, a public, does not exist per se but is always a “cultural artefact” that must be created in a deliberate and ultimately performative act. A public only emerges “by virtue of being addressed.”¹⁰

A publication (and a publication process) thus likewise spurs discursive constellations and – in its existence, nature and shape – is intrinsically related to them. In consequence these discursive publishing spheres only exist with and for a particular audience¹¹ and by nature have an ephemeral or at least unstable character. It is in the nature of things that the publication as such under these conditions takes on not a negligible but an auxiliary role.

From Eva Weinmayr’s article title we learn that “one publishes to find comrades.”¹² Indeed. But the community-forming property of publishing processes and publications – their capacity to spur collaborative yet agonistic processes of negotiating, gaining critical awareness and filtering information, in which also the tasks, roles and positions of the protagonists are a matter of negotiation and are constantly reflected and re-distributed within the publication process – is not exhausted in a networking effect, nor should it be underestimated as a mere instigator of communities of interest. Rather – if we recall the reflections about destituent perspectives – discursive communities, in which knowledge and action are jointly

⁹ Soullelis (2015)

¹⁰ Michael Warner (2002). “Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version),” in: *Quarterly Journal of Speech* Vol. 88, No. 4, November 2002, pp. 413

¹¹ “A public (...) exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, websites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. (...) The public emerges from the conversation, whether it’s the chatter of a DJ or a poet performing a new work. And this is key for us (...) that ‘a public’ might be a self-organized form that does not exist outside the discourse that addresses it. The discourse forms a public by virtue of being addressed — looking at it this way, making a public is performative.” in: Soullelis (2015)

¹² Weinmayr, Eva. “One Publishes to Find Comrades,” in: Klimpel, Oliver (Ed.). *The Visual Event, an education in appearances* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2014), p. 50-59. Online: <http://evaweinmayr.com/wp-content/uploads/Eva-Weinmayr-One-publishes-to-find-comrades.pdf> (accessed 14 August 2017), p. 59

developed as a social good transgressing the limited scopes of traditional publishing ventures, can form spheres in which (counter-)discourse is produced and spread by (counter-)publics, who had their expression or voices suppressed by the existing social order. Within these destituent discursive constellations alternative public spheres can be imagined, devised, performatively anticipated and partially also realized. In this respect Eva Weinmayr quotes Matthew Stadler, the founder of Publication Studio:¹³ “It is imperative that we publish, not only as a means to counter the influence of a hegemonic ‘public’, but also to reclaim the space in which we imagine ourselves and our collectivity.”¹⁴ In principle space here can refer to both an abstract sphere and a material space.

As we see, the community-forming property of publishing processes and publications bears a spatial or even spatializing trait, so to speak. It is providing a part of the infrastructure of a discursive sphere, which basically is independent from any physical situatedness: it is a topical sphere – by definition constituted by not containing planes, its non-divisibility (and hence pre-dimensionality), and its absolute locality–, a spatial proxy, a decoy or surrogate.

As illustrated above, a destituent publishing by definition remains a vague space, it produces an experience of groundlessness, “which requires a tolerance for ambiguity.”¹⁵ Nonetheless operating on terms vague to such an extent asks for a certain framework and a minimal level of common understanding among the actors in those undertakings. These premises can be crystallized out of the work done by Michael Bhaskar. Michael Bhaskar in his book *The Content Machine* suggests that “in conjunction with the contents, which are prerequisite for publishing, the practices of filtering and amplification are the core of publishing.” Filtering and amplification, for Bhaskar, “occur through frames according to models. While the frames capture the ‘presentational or performative aspect’ (they don’t just deliver the work but deliver it in a certain frame [and with a certain intention]) the models encompass the ‘interplay of causal factors, goals, motivations and subjective ideological underpinnings that shapes and provides the *raison d’*

¹³ See: Publication Studio, online: <https://publication-studio.myshopify.com/> (accessed 20 August 2017)

¹⁴ Weinmayr (2014), p. 59

¹⁵ Franke, Anselm. “Curating Against the Grain: Frontiers, Scripted Spaces, and Groundlessness,” in: Mende, Doreen (Ed.). *Thinking under Turbulence* (Geneva: HEAD, 2017), p. 169

être for content.”¹⁶ Amplification for him is not constituted or validated by scale. At a conceptual extreme, if a publication in the moment of its release reached only one figure more than those involved into the publication’s coming into being, amplification is given.¹⁷ Filtering in Michael Bhaskar’s conceptualization of publishing is embedded in a (self)reflexive and collaborative process of thinking about why and when information is gathered, revealed, distributed, manipulated or suppressed, questioning the economic systems, the technological, political, and social mechanisms underlying a publishing undertaking. It demands the involved to negotiate their own positions and liabilities within these structures, to take positions and to negotiate them, but as Nora Sternfeld remarks “without anticipating what that stand should be and thus effecting (...) [remaining] open to the possibility of a knowledge production that (...) would work to challenge the apparatus of value-coding.”¹⁸ Sternfeld accordingly denominates the mindset that participants in publishing processes are asked to adopt. As Simone de Beauvoir phrases it poignantly in her novel *The Mandarins*: “In a curved room you cannot draw a straight line.”¹⁹

By freeing publishing processes from all their “ideological frills” and reducing them to their structural fundamentals, Bhaskar like Soullelis distances himself from a prevalent notion of making public. He rejects the slick-ified outcome, the definite result. Instead he harnesses the potential of the un- or not-yet-defined elements inherent to every publishing process that are able to develop and be developed within the set parameters of his model.

III The Publishing Site

Even a discursive topical sphere like the one delineated above relates to the manifold spaces that are surrounding and interweaving with it, to the political and economic conditions in which it is practiced, to its historical, cultural, legal or technological context and to individual backgrounds and convictions. But as a destituent publishing site – anticipating an alternative public sphere, where (counter-)discourse is produced and spread by

¹⁶ Bhaskar, Michael. *The Content Machine. Towards a Theory of Publishing from the Printing Press to the Digital Network* (London, New York, Delhi: Anthem Press), pp. 18

¹⁷ Gilbert, p. 26

¹⁸ Sternfeld, Nora (2010). “Unglamorous Tasks: What Can Education Learn from its Political Traditions,” online: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/14/61302/unglamorous-tasks-what-can-education-learn-from-itspolitical-traditions/> (accessed 20 July 2017)

¹⁹ Translated by the author from: de Beauvoir, Simone. *Die Mandarins von Paris* (Berlin: Rohwolt, 1965), p. 87

(counter-)publics – it is aware of the contradictory mechanisms of its site-specific anchorage, rooted in, yet keeping a critical distance from, dominant narratives and cultures, and is able to transgress them: forming a space “locally inside and conceptionally outside” its physical environment. While the spatializing capacity of processes of making a public as described above can evolve in different locations between an abstract sphere and a material space, and even though topical spaces are not necessarily restricted to the incorporation of physical elements, the community-shaping aspect of such processes suggests places where agents can physically organize and exchange – creating e.g. publics “through physical production, digital circulation and social gathering.”²⁰ Or to use the formulation of Paul Soulellis: “all of the ways, in which I connect with people online are now really fueling this (...) community in (...) physical space. (...) It’s like a flip. What we used to think about in terms of communities growing from a place outward now it’s feeling as if it is coming from the network into space.”²¹

A “community coming from the network into space” also formed the “primary cast” for “Publishing Acts.” From their respective points of view and against the background given by the parameters of the publishing proposition, the participants collaboratively explored the territorial, economical and sociopolitical situation of Pula. The questions inherent to every publishing undertaking, “Who is speaking? To whom? About what? How? Who has the power to define?”, determined the perspective under which they approached their topic under the premise of four elements, which for Bhaskar constitute publishing: By negotiating the influenceable elements of the models and the suitable frames for filtering and amplification they developed a shared set of publishing conditions, created a common understanding and level of approach; and devised a suitable publishing medium.

It stands to reason that an ad hoc and multi-vocal exchange like this is always also an encounter with the other, possibly unknown, incomprehensible. The foreign, the disconcerting, the inscrutable are neither abolished nor negated in the discourse. They are an integral part of an intimate connectedness, which occurs in processes of sharing, translating and negotiating one's own position against the background of

²⁰ See: Publication Studio, online: <https://publication-studio.myshopify.com/> (accessed 20 August 2017)

²¹ Paul Soulellis in an interview during Miss Read Book Fair 2016, online: <https://vimeo.com/180719257> (accessed 30 August 2017)

the other. In Pula those that are “foreign” – informed by their personal practices and perceptions – through the exchange with their hosts were not bound to adopt a touristic and external view, yet were far from have an insiders’ perspective. The locals, on the other hand, re-encountered their city through the amateurish eyes of experts from abroad. The relatedness within a discursive process of negotiation evolving on and dealing with a concrete territory required the participants of the Pula workshop to shift from their usual perspectives and adopt a kind of in-between-position. From there, preconceived ideas, orientation and evaluation grids as well as the official narrative of industrialization and tourism violently put forward by the city, lost their binding power.

In fact, a destituent publishing in an Agambenian sense is gaining in momentum from the feeling of being between two states. Any action in the in-between results from the relatedness with a past, the existence of here and a hunch of there and is driven by the intention of becoming and getting there (without being able to foresee “there” clearly and without any urge for focusing the blurry picture). All activities performed as destituent publishing in the present are informed by a future to come, in which a possibility beyond the actual state, beyond what is currently embodied and materialized, are preserved and promoted. Thus during the publishing process in Pula the participants tried to pursue publishing as a practice with an inherent “perhaps” – a practice evolving under the premises that we know neither what will happen nor which stance will be “right” or “wrong,” but acknowledging that in the spaciousness of uncertainty there is room to act towards a future to come – embracing the unknown and the unknowable, paradoxes, opacities and open endings. During city walks and editorial working sessions, awareness met naïveté, experiences interspersed with impressions, perceived realities mixed with playful speculation. The willingness to embrace nescience and speculation not as obstructive but as rewarding factors constituted a publishing sphere as spatial proxy – situated locally inside but conceptually outside the official narrative of Pula.

Actively and consciously created temporary worlds like the one in Pula – not utopias but productive sites – can evoke agonistic communities and be purposefully used to challenge the structures and narratives of the predominant culture and as a method to establish agencies beyond officially acclaimed and highly disputed public spheres. As Michael Warner writes,

publishing is “a poetic [notice: better sym-poietic, certainly not auto-poietic] worldmaking.”²² Even so, if a sociopolitical imaginary developed within a publishing process is constitutive of a public sphere projected as a temporary and ephemeral world, participants and instigators of these processes must become aware what kind of societies – or kin, as Donna Haraway suggests²³ – could and should emerge from the conditions we are confronted with today. This presupposes that any discursive activity must recognize and situate itself rhetorically *vis-à-vis* the pre-existing projects of “world making.” Only by being aware of how their sphere characterizes itself to itself and to potential wider publics (as “all discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate.”²⁴) the agents involved in a publishing undertaking can adopt a specific mode of thinking and acting, and – recalling Matthew Stalder’s demand here – “reclaim the space in which we imagine ourselves and our collectivity,” which may eventually lead them to augment their public agency within the predominant public sphere and ultimately to be able to challenge (and eventually replace) it.

A destituent perspective cannot do without investigating historically grown hegemonic and hegemonizing entities in order to trace the offspring of narratives, their entanglement and proliferation and explicate the forces that determine this present. As McKenzie Wark writes in the foreword of his *Molecular Red Reader*: “Sometimes to take three steps forward one has to take two steps back, back into the archive, to find the materials for going on, but in a new way. I just don’t think the canonic theoretical resources (...) are adequate any more to understanding the present. We need new ancestors, and new ways to read our contemporaries.”²⁵ An important impulse for the topical focus the participants chose for their research and works was the *Red Plan of Pula* created by Pulska grupa, produced and distributed by Praksa. This map lays out an image of the city in the age of late capitalism by delineating and “categorizing events according to the type of activity (revolts, demonstrations, [neighborhood] complaints, occupations, evictions, unauthorized construction, small communal actions,

²² Warner (2002), p. 424

²³ “So, make kin, not babies! It matters how kin generate kin.” In: Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 103

²⁴ Warner (2002), p. 424

²⁵ Wark, McKenzie. *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (Verso: London, New York, 2015), p. 4

volunteer work). Apart from that, the map shows the points of potential future conflicts (...).”²⁶ This and Wark’s notion of infiltrating the archives with new ancestors and adding new affordances to the archives-to-be, motivated the participants to devise a series of overlapping city maps making visible and naming experiences that contradict (and interweave with) the official city narrative of thriving industries and jaunty tourism.

Resulting from the obligation inherent to every publishing undertaking – namely to release a publication and pass it on – is the need to not only locate, promote and use destituent infrastructures, public spheres, narratives or imaginaries, but also expand them. This means making use of the publication’s quality as an institutionalizing object able to engage people in a reflexive and active process of engaging with their environments, and as a medium of symbolic valor: with the hope of instigating the rhizomatic multiplication of discursive public spheres, to spur destituent modes of thinking and enable new temporal communities to emerge and novel sorts of agency to grow.

The word “release” illustrates well that every publishing process contains an act of letting go, surrendering control. In the moment it is released, a publication is passed on with a symbolic and discursive performative gesture to create a link between the discourse before and after publication. To that effect the importance of the symbolic values of the medium and the gesture of passing on should not be underestimated. On this subject, the Dutch art curator Nat Muller wrote: “we view the act of publishing as a gesture that accommodates the political, the artistic, and in some cases, the defiant A gesture is something preceding the action, and therefore signifies motion and agency of the most expressive and potent kind, precisely because it is so wrought with intentionality.”²⁷

These thoughts also informed the development of the Pula engagement. The discursive sphere emerging during the publication’s launch will serve as an occasion to think about possible further developments of the “Publishing Acts.” The aim will be to conceive ways of seeing how the thoughts and visions developed within the versatile but still confined setting of publishing constellations such as the group coming together in Pula, can be

²⁶ Pulska grupa (2009). “Red plan of Pula,” Online. <http://praksa.hr/red-plan-pula/> (accessed 24 July 2017)

²⁷ Ludovico, Alessandro. *Post-Digital Print, The Mutation of Publishing since 1894* (Eindhoven: Onomatopoe, 2011; 2014), p. 68

further diffused, given free for appropriation, and eventually lead to transformations of built territories.

This of course, can only be a tentative step at the beginning of the long journey, which the task of developing publishing as a spatializing and spatial practice implies. Ultimately we can hope for a publishing pursued not as an iterative but truly transformative gesture, as a process that can “leak into a vision of the world and of the self that is more universal, in which the transformation does not risk being interrupted into an external and defined object.”²⁸ To conclude with Agamben: developing destituent practices – rewriting the archive by acting in a present that is informed by a future to come – might form the base for a “coming community,’ a form-of-life, “a life which is lived immanently and therefore [is] not reliant upon *dispositifs* to be constituted, nor any form of transcendence.’²⁹ A form-of-life presupposing the emergence of ephemeral communities of kin that through the rejection and immanent overcoming of sovereignty convert exclusion into autonomy.

This text is an abbreviated variation of "From Exclusion to Autonomy: Publishing as a Spatial Act" for *amateurcities.com*.

²⁸ Pollock, Griselda. „From the Virtual Feminist Museum to the Analysis of Biennial Culture,“ in: Mende, Doreen (Ed.). *Thinking under Turbulence* (Geneva: HEAD, 2017), p. 133

²⁹ Boano (2017) (cit. Frost, T. (2015) *The Dispositif between Foucault and Agamben. Law, Culture and the Humanities* Frost, 2015: 17).