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# Involuntary Critique GruppoTorto

Scrutiny over urban transformation is no longer restricted to authorities, artistic or intellectual production but can be triggered by a large group of people. It can be considered a historical change in which the crowd gains major importance.

ent throughout (Silent World)<sup>1</sup> (fig.a) a series of images of material culture. Both described notions (public) created from cutting apart multiple stills from digital technology and need to be reassessed. videos of the world's busiest intersections, avoiding the pixels that contain fragments of people. By draining the images from all traces of human life, Lucie & Simon drained the depicted public spaces from their As technology starts to embrace every aspect of our most intrinsic component-the people themselves. By daily life, also the relationship between the citizen and doing so, the artists conceived contemplative city- the city changes radically. While only a few decades ago scapes, which are by no means mere urban utopias, but it was very difficult to collect useful information connario. The concentration of people can determine the life, the social issues of particular neighbourhoods), success or failure of a public space. Seeing usually nowadays, the same kind of information can be gathcrowded places in such empty conditions leaves us ered in a few seconds and even be live-broadcasted by with a feeling of alienation up to the point that we can the citizens themselves.<sup>4</sup> barely recognise them. It is therefore not surprising that representations of future urban interventions are only a glimpse into an endless series of inventions and commonly crowded with people.

in various ways to the increasing impact of the digi- transportation and computers which started a long tal realm on our lives and our behaviour. Certainly, time ago. Among the more recent innovations we can «cultures, places and spaces, are much more resistant, identify the internet of things, artificial intelligence and (...) are thus not so easily abolished».<sup>2</sup> On the other and the ascent of digital networks (clouds etc.). Though hand, there are a significant number of activities (e.g. these are still too new to derive reliable predictions, it social integration, political debate<sup>3</sup>) which are shifting is, however, possible to trace two different tendencies away from the physical public space to the digital that could dominate the future of our cities. The first realm. Even if tourist migrations might partially hide follows the mentioned shift, whereby communication, this imminent process of decline, citizens retreat more exchange of goods, political manifestation, and other and more from public life. Are we facing a crisis of the forms of exchange largely move into the virtual. Interpublic space due to collective renunciation?

important to reconsider how the term of (public space) space retains its main functions and is enriched (punccould be defined in the first place: its definition de- tually or area-wide) by digital technology via «smart» pends very much on which of its constituents (vpublic) objects. The digital realm turns into a superimposed or (space) we focus on. It is either the (public) part layer on top of the existing. In this way public space which implies the social sphere (as to say without soci- becomes (accessible) again, thanks to new gateways, ety there is no public space) or the «space» part which which are based on the exchange of information. In presumes physical definition with buildings, objects, contrast to former systems appearing physically in our landscape etc. (without architecture there is no public environment (fig. b), the new gateways are completely space). Public space can be defined as the main concep- invisible. The borders between the physical and digital tual component of the city, the most complex habitat worlds become increasingly blurred and «smart cities»

The artists Lucie de Barbuat and Simon Brodbeck pres- of a species, as well as the most visible representation of extreme emptiness and surreal reverie. Each image is and (space) are heavily shaken by the new trends of

## Revolution without revolutionaries

rather accurate depictions of a threatening future sce- cerning the city (number of inhabitants, the quality of

The technologies we are surrounded by are innovations: we are standing on the shoulders of giants The described alienating feeling can be linked such as the development of telecommunications, net becomes «the public space of the 21st century»<sup>5</sup>. In order to get to the heart of the matter, it is The second assumes a turning point in which public





fig.b: «Stockholm Telephone Tower», 1913, Courtesy Tekniska Museet

of the digital.

group of people. It can be considered a historical formers. change in which the crowd gains major importance. By disclosing our behaviour, we voice critique by the simplest actions and choices: choosing one parking lot instead of another, sitting on a bench, riding the bike At this point of time the amount of collected data is dataflow.

expression (involuntary critique), it is crucial to have a collection, Google released an innovative product in

witness the genesis of «smart citizens»<sup>6</sup>. The two closer look at the term «critique» itself. Coming from described tendencies would lead to completely differ- Ancient Greek word (krino), it stands for (to sort), or ent outcomes regarding the role of the planer: the first (to separate), also translated as (to decide)<sup>7</sup>. In this way which assumes the retreat of activities from public «critique» can be related to a judgement succeeded by space would lead to the entire loss of an important an act of decision. It can be argued that the act of such field of activity. The second, i.e. the superimposing of a decision is the manifestation of critique itself and as new layer, would bring on the contrary new challenges such it does not require a precise receiver or a particuas well as new tasks. As a result, we are confronted with lar system of evaluation. The reception of such (critique) a radical crossroads in the planning field that can turn by the possibilities of digital networks allows for an inout to be existential. In this way we can assert that the crease in power on behalf of citizens and thus induces public space can only persist with the implementation a slow transformation of the city. Surely, on one hand, the process of evaluation is necessary to sort out inac-One of the most striking aspects of the sec- curacies and false assumptions, as well as to devise ond scenario is that scrutiny over urban transforma- concrete strategies and develop political agendas. On tion is no longer restricted to authorities, artistic or the other hand, the evaluation process is unable to intellectual production but can be triggered by a large constitute «critique» per se, but relies on acting per-

#### Users or consumers?

to work, etc. By choosing and reacting to the environ- immense and keeps growing constantly. Therefore it is ment, the act of living turns itself into an involuntary not only the question of who is willing to interpret big critique of the city. Surely there has always been a cer- data, but who is actually able to deal with them. In the tain degree of such critique. The main difference is that last decade large media firms managed to develop a the critique is nowadays accessible throughout endless dominant position in data evaluation and started to develop commercial schemes: whilst smartphones have In order to understand the meaning of the already become a notorious, widespread tool of data



fig.c: Banksy, «One Nation Under CCTV», Graffiti, London 2008

2012<sup>8</sup>, called (Google Glass). The use of the new prod- which users of Glass were insulted as (Glassholes)<sup>11</sup> and posed on your visual field and you can interact with it, spaces and is currently in progress. both in a digital and a physical way. Throughout different apps you can access cloud services such as pho- associated increasingly with commercial features. It is tos, calendar, contacts, maps, emails, text messaging— not surprising if London's first (Smart street)<sup>13</sup> was conjust to name a few. By the provided camera and audio ceived in order to improve shopping experience and input, calls can be turned into so called (hangouts), not the quality of their public space. Indeed people which use screen sharing and geo-localisation.<sup>9</sup> Subse- who walk on the energy-generating pavement are not quently, an algorithm searches for recurring patterns rewarded with a real improvement in the quality of the and preferences. On this base, users will receive com- space, but mostly with discounts at the stores they are mercial suggestions on all their cloud connected just walking past. The mentioned examples show how devices and data are turned into a profitable source for companies mainly pursue commercial aims; due to advertising business.

from the most private sphere of the performing indi- used for financial purposes. vidual is so extensive that The Telegraph described Google Glass as «Orwellian surveillance with fluffier branding», specifying that, «You don't own the data, you don't control the data and you definitely don't The question that arises is whether there are other,

uct offers a good example of the mechanisms that lead threatened in broad daylight. It seems, indeed, that to commercial application of involuntary critique. The facing public life with a camera on eye level has exceedconcept behind this wearable device is quite simple: ed the limits of acceptance. Indeed, in the beginning of you no longer need a screen to access the digital world. 2015, only after a couple of years, sale was shut down The reality becomes the screen: right when you turn on for end-users.<sup>12</sup> The comeback in the professional maryour Google Glass, the digital world is directly im- ket is deliberately avoiding to interference with public

Functions like gathering and socializing are economic and technical reasons it can be stated that The sheer amount of information coming involuntary critique is therefore mostly registered and

## To build with bits and bytes

know what happens to the data. Put another way- non-commercial ways to deal with involuntary criwhat would you say if instead of it being Google Glass, tique. How could urbanism and architecture benefit it was Government Glass?»<sup>10</sup> The described controversy from its potential? Whilst most of the data is processed about privacy (fig. c) took on a whole new dynamic in by big private companies, there are more and more



fig.d: Maximilian Schich, Mauro Martino with Nature Video, (Birth and Death), Screenshot from (Charting Culture), 2014

planning and welfare services.

a daily basis, either directly or as a by-product of our devise a chance for urban planning guidelines. social activities» is taken as opportunity due to the fact that it «is often associated with contextual metainformation about location, usage and people». This underlines the potential of the link between people's Dealing with possible applications of involuntary criactionable».16 With only a few parameters provided by <enact>? user data, it is possible to come to intriguing conclusions about main urban factors. As such there is the izens would feel more responsible for their environwork of Schich (et al.)<sup>17</sup> which points out the growth ment<sup>23</sup> i.e. they are more aware of issues around them and decline of urban areas simply by tracing the birth and they start thinking about pros and cons of topand death date of «recorded people»<sup>18</sup>. Their results down decisions. Throughout the possibility of expressreflect the idea that the people's decision where to live ing critique without big effort, citizens could give voice is already a significant critique on the opportunities to their needs and desires. Engagement hereby plays an they aspire for. Throughout their written report and a important role since «meeting the desires of communities video project (fig. d) entitled (Charting Culture)<sup>19</sup>, can only happen when citizens are engaged in the shap-Schich (et al.) have turned simple data into a «sociolo- ing of their cities.»<sup>24</sup> The idea to implement partgists' and anthropologists' study [about] the growth icipatory mechanisms in the city is surely not new. Arand evolution of human culture.»20

as a tool to benefit from involuntary critique is the the idea to its theoretical limits. The novelty about it is

disciplines that gather involuntary critique following project of the Danish architect Jan Gehl who in 1993 (public aims) and collective interest, among them town began to assess the quality of public space and public life in Melbourne.<sup>21</sup> The study was reassessed in 2005 One of the emerging applications is the cre- and another decade later, in 2015. Throughout this ation of (Data Urbanism)<sup>14</sup> which is a new tool that is long period of time his team was able to point out the based on the visualisation of scientific data enriched by success of urban strategies in Melbourne which aimed dynamic, user-emitted information. This approach al- at «long-term commitment to increasing the levels of lows, according to leading online platforms like pedestrian accessibility.»<sup>22</sup> The more data is available «morphocode»<sup>15</sup>, a «critical evaluation of active policies from acting individuals in the city, the more precise is and city services by transforming otherwise hidden the evaluation. Data Urbanism represents in general a patterns into visual arguments». «Data we generate on valuable example which fosters the public aim and can

#### From (act) to (enact)

choices taken as valuable critique. The way out of the tique leads inevitably to the question whether «critique» difficult implications of privacy issues is hereby to turn needs consciousness and intention in order to become individual data into anonymous group patterns. To an effective tool for urban transformation. What would achieve representative results, data urbanists clearly happen if involuntary critique was turned into opt in favour of «making data visible, accessible and deliberate choice-shifting from the notion of (act) to

The consequence would generally be that citchitects and urban planners from the 60s and 70s (fig. Another relevant example of Data Urbanism e) put this topic at the top of their agenda and pushed



fig.e: Cedric Price, «Fun Palace», 1961

mobile devices in broader digital networks. The ulti- mental statements. The collected and processed informate step would be hereby the idea to translate cri- mation could be further shared and discussed in comquestion is how is it possible to achieve this with the discussion and can benefit from the processed infornew means of the digital age?

ry where we need to pursue more speculative concepts. parks. Public space would thus regain a collective value Generally we can see a potential for the emergence of newly accessed by digital means, eventually being envoluntary critique in the combination of the two riched by them. tendencies: (Big Data Collection) and (Participatory the first and bring it together with the commitment is radically changing, This can be regarded as an imand engagement of the second.

engaged. The evaluation of the critique is by far the big- ment of public space itself ends up gaining further valgest part of the challenge. There is the technical part in ue. We believe that this value is reinforced in the mowhich ensures the right framework. The reason for lead us to think about new ways of interaction for citicannot be considered a «volonté generale»<sup>25</sup>.

way the above mentioned act of choosing one particular dimension.

the possibility of individuals to interact via modern parking lot instead of another, is turned into a judgetique into architectural and urban programmes. The mon platforms. Planners enter into the digital mation. In consequence, the IoLT starts having not At this point we set foot on unknown territo- only digital but physical impact on streets, squares and

As planners we witness a striking impact of Planning. Both exist but do not work together. The the digital not only in our lives but also in our field of aim would be to take the immediacy and efficiency of profession: public space, as we are used to perceive it, portant opportunity rather than a setback: apart from The described combination could arise from commercial endeavours which suggest an impoverishreinforcing awareness on the side of the performing ment of the public space, we can see a big opportunity individual and from developing suitable evaluation to work with involuntary critique of citizens through tools. To move from involuntary to voluntary critique, digital networks. The potential lies on the one hand in people's consciousness is needed. Only people with a the pursuit of public interest and on the other hand in sharpened awareness could be regarded as actively the application to urbanism. The design and managewhich appropriate systems need to be available for ment when performing individuals become more processing the Big Data. Moreover, there must be a conscious of their involuntary critique turning into a meta-process, a sort of «evaluation of the evaluation» deliberate, collaborative choice. These considerations granting a critical instance is that behaviour patterns zens via digital tools. It must be carefully handled in order not to fall into (demagogic) use of people's opin-In the not too distant future the (Internet of ions. What makes a participatory design valuable, be-Things- will be just a reminiscence of the past. The sides the planning results, is probably the effect of the (Internet of Living Things)<sup>26</sup> will have gained far more process itself, that is, citizens' interest, engagement importance. Individuals deliberately choose to record and action. It can be argued, therefore, that digital their daily acts within automatic feedback-recognising means could trigger a behavioural change which redesystems (e.g. voice, eye-movement recognition). In this fines public space both in its social as well as territorial

#### Involuntary Critique

In Saint-Exupéry's <The Little Prince> we learn an important lesson about responsibility which applies also to the involvement of citizens in public space: As the fox said to the Little Prince «People have forgotten this truth. But you mustn't forget it. You become responsible forever for what you've tamed. You're responsible for your rose.» That is to say, that involvement has to be bound to effort and dedication which goes beyond mere expression of opinion.

The digital world has plunged public space into an existential crisis but it could also be the key for its survival.

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