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## Constructed Places

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„What has to be recognised first of all is that we live in different spaces.“ This deceptively simple and obvious statement comes from the foreword of German phenomenologist and architect Franz Xavier Baier's book *Der Raum. Prolegomena zu einer Architecture de gelebtens Raumes*.<sup>(1)</sup> In it, the author describes diverse aspects of spatial phenomena on the basis of a wide array of analytical and far-reaching concepts. In principle, he distinguishes between three categories: abstract, *unlived* space, actual, *lived* space and theoretical, *expanded* space. Baier allocates forty-five sub-categories to these three main categories. His analysis presents a remarkably lucid picture of just how complex and existential the concept of space is and can be.

Space is mutable, being at once finite and infinite, and thus multivalent. Space is private, public, historic architectural and, ultimately, existential. Depending on the respective situation, it emerges, appears, overwhelms and becomes fact. It triggers a variety of feelings, liberating and oppressive, familiar and alienating. Space can be imagined and seen, felt, found and invented. It can be sketched, planned or built - in reality or in the mind. Space is the cosmos, a room, world and house, field and place. And someone all these aspects are united within the still young oeuvre of Boris Rebetez.

The spaces this artist draws and constructs are not homogenous. There are fragments, experiments, details and excerpts, which he isolates and analyses before creating new constellations that in turn form another space. In doing this, Rebetez favours the technique of collage, which allows him, like no other medium, to juxtapose otherwise unrelated elements in an associative way. It is a simple and efficient form of restructuring what already exists in order to image the world anew. Boris Rebetez uses existing images from various print media - pictures from newspaper, holiday brochures and architecture periodicals - and distils them into new spatial entities. Found images of landscapes, urban spaces and interiors, mountains and conference rooms, slagheaps and trade fair halls, parks and libraries, rooftop and ceilings are cut up, dismantled, dovetailed and reassembled and, in some cases, re-photographed and enlarged.

In his early collages (c. 1997) the composition of space is based on analogy. For instance, one untitled work shows a bird's eye view of an anonymous urban sprawl with no clear indication of its geographic location. At second glance, we realise that the houses in the foreground are smaller than those in the background, and we can discern traces of a few horizontal lines. Though free-hand, they are cut with precision, emerging only to disappear again suddenly in the topography of the landscape. We can make out four lakes and we surmise that they are one and the same lake. What Boris Rebetez is doing here is expanding the technique of collage to include sampling by multiplying certain situations and repeating them from different viewpoints, with the result that the initially new composition itself seems even more uniform. Later, his collages become more heterogeneous, his combinations of visual elements more audacious and his compositions more raw. Faced with only a detail, rather than the overview, we feel closer to the scene than we do in his earlier work.

The works from the period 1999 - 2001 show Boris Rebetez' approach to space becoming increasingly ambiguous. Yet the coexistence of different, often quite ordinary volumes, views, moods and resources creates something akin to a definitive, collective notion of the world. Not only do the modest dimensions of these collages, measuring between 11 x 15,5 and 17,5 x 15 cm, elicit comparison with tourist postcards - a device that aims to capture the essence of a place - they also focus on urban fragments that we recognise immediately without ever necessarily actually see them. But instead of sight, monuments or palatial buildings, Boris Rebetez shows escalators and roundabouts, entrance halls and motorway piers, water basins and hou-

sing estate. His combinations of tectonic and organic elements illustrate peripheral situations that are at once strange and familiar, mutable and static.

It may well be his handling of light that is instrumental in generating this ambiguous atmosphere. As in postcards with weather-enhancing skies of an incredible monochromatic blue, Boris Rebetez often uses illustrations with strong light contrasts to join day with night, brightness with shadows. By orchestrating light in this way, he not only heightens the impressionist character of his compositions, but also provokes a consciously staged reality. In a more recent work from 2004, for instance, we have the feeling of being both inside and outside. On the lower half of the picture we can see the diagonal line of a grey road surface that contrasts with the opposing white and red lines of a racetrack. The upper part of the picture is dominated by an out-of-focus interior in extreme perspective. Between these two sections, a wedge-like third element pushes in from the left, lending depth to the composition with a view of a container-like volume. And even though there is little more than the merest hint of architecture in this bizarre structure, the space is a plausible architectural as it is intangible.

This aspect of intangibility constitutes the very essence of Boris Rebetez' works, with their air of succinct efficiency and yet enormous complexity. Although the viewer sees and experiences spaces, it is a space that remains beyond grasp. As the American poet Michael Palmer so aptly put it: „Space begins because we look away from where we are“. (2) Significantly, these words suggest that space does not develop in looking away. The sentence describes the somewhat heedless, casual glance into the distance that allows us to perceive boundaries in the first place. It is not in conscious, concentrated looking that the world reveals itself to us, but in casual, coincidental perception.

This seeming contradiction is echoed in a quote, often cited by the artist from Fernando Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet*: „a desert street full of people.“ (3) Here, too, there is a sense of the peripheral, of a desolate place („deserted“ implying both emptiness and barrenness) that crowds into the conscious mind. While the words of Palmer extend the gaze into the distance, the words of Pessoa narrow it down to a specific point, to the masses. And whereas, in the former, the place is defined by the concrete, in the latter it is a vague wilderness. It is this play of contradictions in scale, texture, colouring and depth that makes the collages of Boris Rebetez so distinctive.

Apart from the collages, there are also gouaches, large pen-and-ink drawings, sculptures - all similarly dominated by fractal structures. His latest pen-and-ink drawings are not compact and condensed, but fill entire walls with their fluid, mottled composition that extends beyond the edges of the work. Here, too, there is a confluence of microcosm and macrocosm, of everyday objects such as buckets, tables or barrel and architectural elements from every conceivable stylistic era. The layering of different specific elements leaves diffuse traces, as on an archaeological site. Different periods are mixed and different realities made visible. Apparently organic elements, as in the collages. Indeed, they even seem enigmatic, like „world maps“ or strange projections in which time - past, present and future - melts into thin air.

The sculptures in the form of ramps, parapets, platforms, bases, terraces, stages or miniaturised modernist buildings appear deceptively solid, but they are no less fragile than the works of paper. These model-like objects, with their typological references to minimal art, structuralism and modern architectural history, are generally deployed as scenographic elements in exhibitions, complementing, positioning and perspectively extending the two-dimensional works. Accordingly, the sculptural works appear in his exhibitions as boulders or ruins, shells or façades, which as he says himself, „were created too early or too late or somewhere else“.

The scenographic aspect of the Basel exhibition is particularly striking in that this, his first installation on such a scale, not only closes the circle, but actually marks the beginning of a new cycle as well. The exagonal volume of the ground-floor exhibition space has been reduced in scale, doubled and reconstructed as a kind of „trade fair booth“. The interlocking honeycomb structure, part grounded, part hovering, divides the room, creating in-between spaces, corridors and window-like vistas. As in his collages and his pen-and-ink drawings, Boris Rebetez modulates the space and defines new parameters: the model (the sculpture) becomes architecture,

while the architecture (the real space) becomes a model. He presents this intervention as both a beginning and an end. From the terrace-like platform, visitors have a new panoramic view of the exhibition space, the museum entrance and the courtyard. One of his photoshop studies for this exhibition project illustrates, or rather explores, precisely this overview, looking from the sculpture towards the main entrance of the museum, where projection and reality can no longer be distinguished. Interestingly, this single manipulation of two images - the photographed view of the model on the one hand and the picture from the museum's website on the other hand - could actually be a collage in its own right... bringing us full circle.

But it is precisely at this point that a form of „space recycling“ kicks in, introducing a new cycle. The functional museum space itself becomes an integral part of the artistic concept, while the viewer, who usually plays a passive role in this space, takes on an active role as an extra. This visual feedback is comparable to the auditory feedback of the so-called Larsen Effect, named after the Danish physicist Soren Larsen (1871-1957).<sup>(4)</sup> It is an effect familiar to all concert-goers and conference participants: if you hold a microphone too close to a loudspeaker, it causes a high-pitched tone of rapidly increasing intensity that can even make the loudspeaker system break down. This phenomenon arises from the combination of two different components (loudspeaker and microphone), whose association, densification or interference suddenly produces a third component (high-pitched tone). In terms of Boris Rebetez' works, this effect is enlivening rather than destructive. These are places, both real and constructed, that we perceive and recognise as such, but which remain inaccessible in their enmeshment. In other words: space begins because we look away from where we are.

(1): Franz Xavier Baier, *Der Raum. Prolegomena zu einer Architecture de gelebtens Raumes*, Cologne 1996

(2): Michael Palmer, *Sun*, from his poem „Baudelaire Serie“

(3): Fernando Pessoa, *The book of Disquiet*.

(4): *The Larsen effect*, OK-Centrum für Gegenwartskunst Linz - Casino, Forum d'art contemporain Luxembourg, 2001