



Signs of the City – Metropolis Speaking

Barcelona :::::::::: Berlin :::::::::: London :::::::::: Sofia
Research – Exhibition – Youth Art – Conference
Urban Research on Resemblance and Diversity
in four European Metropolises

Abstract

Employing digital photography and new media, Signs of the City – Metropolis speaking will explore the sign systems of the European city by drawing up a visual inventory of four selected metropolises. During an envisaged two-year cooperation framework, professional artists will work with young people in Berlin, London, Sofia and Barcelona to generate an inventive online image database: a contemporary archive providing free access, interaction and usage.

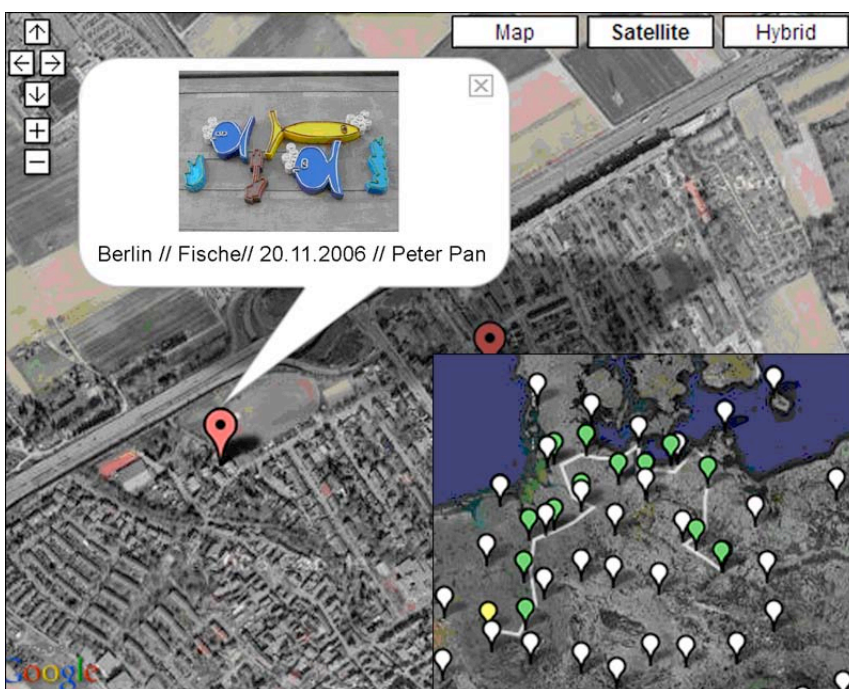
The project aims to initiate a comparative study of the sign systems of the ‘other’ (European city, neighbourhood, social groups), and to instigate a multi-level dialogue about these. This dialogue will take place in virtual and physical form via images, information exchange and reflective discourse. Its artistic adaptation and public presentation will take place simultaneously in all participating cities. This exhibition phase will be accompanied by an extensive documentation in form of a multilingual publication and rounded off by an international conference.

The individual project elements of Signs of the City – Metropolis Speaking create in their interplay a border-crossing *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a complete work of art linking and engaging renowned contemporary arts institutions, media training centres, youth art and leisure organisations and one of the world's leading academic institutes for social research. With the innovative possibilities of data processing, the four cities will be visually and virtually interwoven. This networking occurs by way of an artistic exploration of the pictorial and symbolic codes of contemporary urban landscapes, creating a hitherto un(fore)seen image of the European City.



Material and tools

Camera mobile phones and digital cameras will be employed to map and organise the discovered elements – signs, symbols, signifying facets – in a visual inventory. All images will be uploaded into an online database via a computer-based editing system. When entered into the archive, each image will be named and categorised along pre-established norms. Furthermore, each image can be individually and creatively tagged with keywords, drawn from personal impressions and perceptions by the young photographer. These images will also contain information on its geographical positioning via GPS-data, thus allowing the participants to locate the taken pictures on online maps provided by free cartographic services such as Google Maps. Through these technological processes, the images will be associated visually, virtually and yet tangibly with the urban sites from which they were taken.



In the adjacent picture once can trace the detailed journey of a photographer, linked by points indicating the individual images taken. By zooming in on the map, it will be possible to observe the context and environment of the respective image.

All results will be published immediately on the internet archive. Visitors to this online database can compile and combine different images playfully, depending on their own interests and criteria. The linkage of different search criteria will allow or indeed entice the viewer to search for resemblances and diversities in the surface and sign system of the four cities. Furthermore, the impressions and evaluations of the young people offer manifold options of interpretation. Apart from a key word search (for example for the terms “transport” or “arrows”), other criteria may be taken from the personal profile of the photographer (age, gender, occupation, etc.). Furthermore, the viewer can establish connections between place and time, repetition and progress.

This manner of employing state-of-the-art mobile communications technology aims to draw on the effortless and often playful access of young people as a starting point for a more deeply involved engagement with the topics and methodologies at hand.

Simultaneous public exhibitions

During the concluding presentation phase of the project in autumn 2008, several exhibitions in the participating cities will be curated based on the visual material of the research phase. Thanks to specific cooperation with the cities' public transport companies, such as the TMB in Barcelona and the BVG in Berlin, some of these presentations will take place in public (transport) space, in order to emphasise the results of the artistic research in the urban habitat of participants as well as observers. Furthermore, renowned Institutes of Contemporary Arts in each city – the House of World Cultures in Berlin, the Centre for Contemporary Culture in Barcelona, Watermans in London and the House of Cinema in Sofia – will be implicated and integrated to different degrees in this exhibition phase. All exhibition spaces will be networked and closely associated amongst themselves.

Project aims

- To generate a closer understanding of the European city as an “arena” of intercultural encounter and a “workshop” of European identity/ies – associations, fractures and bridges included – in both participants and observers
- To offer a platform for an accessible and experience-oriented artistic/aesthetic engagement of and between young inhabitants of European metropolises based on visual arts methodology and modern communication technology.
- To sensitise participants and observers to the multiple layers of visual signs and significations in urban landscapes
- To mobilise the examination of urban signs for the processes of identity formation and political maturation of the participating young people, given that questions of belonging to peer groups, subcultures and ethnicities, as well as their correspondent norms, values and rituals of differentiation, continue to be played out through sign systems and symbolic languages.
- To highlight and create awareness of resemblance and diversity in the metropolises of an integrating Europe



Activities

I. Implementation phase

1. Kick-off Meeting in Berlin / *three days*

The partners are made aware of all relevant contractual and content-related coordinates of the project, adopt a work plan and schedule, and agree on a method of communication.

2. Arts and Education Lab (AEL) / *two-day events in all participating cities*

The kick-off for the actual research phase will take place in form of an initial Arts and Educational Lab, a workshop in which local artists and project managers will get to know each other and establish a basis for dialogue. The AEL also allows the artistic and pedagogical direction of the overall project to clarify the collaborative framework for the coming months. The usage of the online photo community and its concurrent media technology will be discussed, while methodological issues and approaches to semiotic image interpretation will equally be conveyed and developed. Finally, individual artists will present and discuss different possible thematic approaches to the subject matter at hand. With already secured support of the Goethe Institute, the Spanish Embassy and the British Council, it will be possible to integrate two artists from other partner cities in each local AEL, thus establishing in the very first phase a dialogue between artists across the city network.

3. Photographic research / *during approximately one year*

In approximately 35 workshops in all participating cities, around 350 young people will be working with at least one professional artist/photographer per group in order to carry out this 'urban research'. Characteristic signs of the cities will be captured photographically, discussed and interpreted in the workshops, before being systematised and archived. Each workshop will develop an independent subject focus, developed by the artist leading the workshop in correspondence with the artistic coordinator. In this manner, the workshops will generate a wide variety of methodological and thematic approaches, which will then be made visible in the standardised archiving system of the photo community.



4. Virtual Network / during the entire project phase

The most recent generation of the world wide web, also called web 2.0., is no longer principally an information platform but rather a communications instrument. Millions of members of so-called social networks enter into contact with each other on a daily basis, amateur photographers share interactive image platforms, and video fans show their latest creations online. Signs of the City wants to exploit this new form of communication, which is particularly popular with young people. The images created during the project will be immediately visible within an online photo community. This will allow all participants in the project to continually view the results created by the other partners and to draw inspiration from them for their own further work. A virtual dialogue may also unfold within the community through the comments, blogs and assessments common to such internet archives. The photo community will offer all participants a point of contact even after the workshop phase has finished and thus guarantees them their continued participation in an international social network.

5. Exchange programme LAB 2 “Show me your City” / one week respectively in every city

A selection of participants from the workshops will participate in further artistic project work focusing on themes of exchange and encounter. They will meet their peers in another city. These meetings will be coordinated and mediated by artists and educators.

II. Simultaneous Exhibition Phase, Autumn 2008

6. Presentations in Public Space

The photographic products coming out of the research process will in all cities be adapted into an exhibition format in public spaces. These exhibitions will take place in heavily frequented urban sites: the public transport companies in Barcelona (TMB) and Berlin (BVG) have already confirmed they will develop and host a public art presentation in their underground spaces. These presentations in public space will coincide with the exhibitions hosted in centres for contemporary art in all cities (see 7.).

7. Exhibitions in Centres for Contemporary Arts

Further to the presentations in public space, the concluding phase of Signs of the City – Metropolis Speaking also comprises simultaneous exhibitions in Berlin, London, Barcelona and Sofia. The project's two co-organisers, the House of World Cultures in Berlin and Watermans London, as well as the House of Cinema in Sofia, have already confirmed their participation in this respect and will develop, co-curate and host the exhibitions in accordance with their spaces and specific interests. The Centre of Contemporary Culture in Barcelona has demonstrated interest in collaborating in this area, further to their commitment of hosting the local AEL, and conversations with other contemporary arts institutions in London have been promising. By the time of the project start in

2007, all exhibition spaces will be confirmed. The exhibitions will comprise installations, graphic work and interactive as well as multimedia works, which can draw on the image database holding approximately 150.000 photographs taken by the young participants in all four cities. A multilingual documentation of the project process, as well as a public presentation of the internet photo community, will accompany all exhibitions.

8. International Conference “Signs of the European City”

A conference about the Signs of the European City and the intercultural dialogue that will have become latently and patently manifest during the project process will be discussed from the perspective of project participants, artists and academic speakers from a variety of disciplines in late autumn 2008. The House of World Culture hosts this international encounter, conceptualised and organised in close cooperation with the project’s academic partner, the Centre for Urban and Community Research at Goldsmith’s College, University of London.

9. Evaluation

The project will be formally evaluated in all participating cities. The objective of this study, apart from ensuring the quality management of the project, is the analysis and discussion of the project’s key elements, and the evaluation of its process and success. These (interim) results will be documented and passed back to the participants. The results will then be gathered in an overall study and presented at the final conference. The evaluation will be conducted in all four cities, coordinated and overseen by the Centre for Urban and Community Research at Goldsmiths College.



Contribution of co-organisers

The consolidation of the already existing local network and the further extension of this structure within the participating European cities will be the task of the respective local co-organisers. In order to optimise the regional implementation of the project and respect the cultural autonomy of the participating European metropolises, the specific local possibilities available to each city will be taken into account. Therefore, each city will count with a local project management, both organisational and artistic, that is lead by the co-organisers. These will therefore both accompany the entire research/workshop phase in their respective cities and represent the interface to the overall project and its communication structure.

These local organisational tasks include:

- The coordination of the Arts and Education Labs
- The coordination of the LAB 2 exchange programmes
- The coordination of the research workshops
- The handling of media relations and PR



Furthermore, the co-organisers will also take on particular tasks regarding the presentation of the project results in form of the simultaneous exhibitions and the project documentation.

- The House of World Cultures in Berlin will, in cooperation with Goldsmith's College London, take responsibility development of the concluding conference and will host the most large-scale of the exhibitions
- Hangar in Barcelona will develop in close cooperation with the project coordinator the visualisation of the project in terms of a corporate design, which will be visible in all participating cities
- Watermans London will contribute specifically to the content and conceptual development of the Arts and Education Labs, and will at this point work closely together with urban dialogues
- CUCR at Goldsmiths College will, apart from contributing to the conference, coordinate the accompanying study in all participating cities and present its findings in a concluding study.

Public relations

The overall communication concept entails a variety of communication modules that are closely interlocked, guaranteeing a straightforward, transparent and resonating communication of content. Based on a detailed schedule and action plan the following elements will be implemented:

- The overall process will be accompanied by a national and international public relations initiative. Relevant media representatives will be contacted directly and offered to accompany the research process. Distribution will include around 500 editorial offices and independent journalists in Germany alone. The varying phases and events of Signs of the City will allow a recurring contact with the media. Due to the various different aspects – art, sociology, regeneration, international relations, youth, technology, etc. – a considerable and consistent level of attention is anticipated.
- Flyers and other publicity media will announce events and exhibitions in each participating cities.
- An important form of communication is the inclusion of disseminators, i.e. institutions, organizations etc., which are active in their respective areas or become part of the workshops. These will be asked to distribute and broadcast the content of the project either digitally or at events. This has been proven to be particularly successful in previous projects.
- The photo community will be visible throughout the duration of the project and can reflect the process as it evolves. This online platform will also enable the publication of media information in various different languages. The aim is to create an extensive network with other existing and emerging platforms.
- Due to the coordinators' overall communications and PR concept, activities will be realized that are attuned to local particularities and resources.



Target groups

The primary target group of this project comprises young people and young adults, guided by professional artists. The participants will be working jointly with schools, community centres, social training centres, design colleges and similar institutions. Both creatively talented young people and those with learning difficulties will take part in Signs of the City.

Through this process of discovering visual and signifying codes in the urban landscape the European city is presented in an as yet unseen and unimagined way. It not only shows differences and similarities within and between metropolises but is simultaneously shaped by the young peoples' individual perception of their urban environment.

The second target group consists of the participating artists who, through their communicative function and by developing concepts for the individual workshops, are able to discuss, exchange and expand their experiences with work colleagues. Apart from the reflection on common methodological and technical approaches concerning the workshops with the young people, the emphasis is on the development of personal focus points and artistic exchange with other participating artists.

Both target groups – young people and artists – will be connected within the overall project through the online photo community. The above mentioned Arts and Education Labs (AEL) and LAB 2 Exchange Programme shall further contribute to extensive contact and connections.

Values for European context

The project aims for a multi-level engagement with the visual “surface” of European cities beyond familiar tourist clichés. Lived and perceived everyday environments will be registered photographically: as signs and symbols they suggest the presence of imperceptible stories and values and might be decoded as traces of a European culture. To work on these codes in a jointly initiated and implemented European project will thus help to document, distinguish and valorise the different cultural conditions that become visible, cross over, and have affected each other historically in each metropolis. This perspective on the visual side of the contemporary city equally allows the participants and audience to reflect on the emphasis and impact of today's globally produced images; it interrogates the extent to which senses and reason are subject to such global suggestions and what kind of space for manoeuvre remains at the disposal of the individual.

Furthermore, the city as the “place of the foreign and the foreigner” offers perspectives of and on foreign and yet already familiar cultures, as well as on symbols of cultural or ethnic exclusion. The photographic captures and their confluence in a European archive therefore make it possible for these symbols, in which intercultural entanglements are contained, to be perceived as well as decoded. The project wants not only to represent and put into focus such instances of cultural hybridisation and differentiation, but it wants to tease

out their implications on the basis of artistic production, in order to arrive at personal and expressive approaches to it.

Finally, the border-crossing perspective on one's neighbours as well as on one's own immediate surroundings permit a more differentiated perception of and reflection on historical and contemporary similarities and diversity. In a sense, this perspective may stimulate a dialogue of cultures and an attempt at bridging social, ethnic and cultural divides. This dialogue is "contemporary" in the sense that on one hand it uses innovative networking and communication technologies, and on the other promotes place-based relationships through personal encounters in the city of the Other. This double form of border-crossing will be characteristic for Signs of the City – Metropolis Speaking.

Long-term outcomes

- The online photo community will continue to exist and be accessible to all project partners. Other European cities will be able to join the image archive at some point in the future.
- The close network of artists will be able to contribute significantly to future multinational projects.
- The variety of artistic-methodological approaches, which will be explored and documented during this project, can be used and developed in other areas of cultural Education. Signs of the City offers a sustainable approach by encouraging new possibilities of artistic creation in social contexts and by breaking down barriers between economy, society, cultural education and art.
- The high interconnectedness of this proposed project can be seen as exemplary in giving socially aware cultural projects a sustained European public presence.

