Democratic Interventions into the Urbanisation of Nature

Alex Loftus

"The hope is that in our efforts to step beyond the natural history of society and to produce real social history, we can avoid the complete obliteration of nature, and society and history with it. It is not merely capital that must be restructured but the political basis of society, in order to produce a genuinely social geography"
Neil Smith (1984), Uneven Development

Introduction

Urban interventions seek to challenge the ways in which cities are experienced, shaped and lived in the contemporary moment. Through developing artistic projects in public space, they seek to draw attention to powerful interests and specific social relationships that make cities the places they are. They invite us to explore alternative ways of organising relationships and different ways of producing space. Although academic interest is growing in artistic explorations of the city, psycho-geographies of cities and the personality of cities (Pile 2005, Brennan 2005), little of this work has developed the explicit political challenges thrown up by urban interventions (for exceptions see Pinder 2005a, 2005b). This paper seeks to better understand this politics through charting the development of a series of workshops organised by City Mine(d) and culminating in a platform for urban interventions. After describing the specific practices of the artists involved in the project, I attempt to tease out some of the common themes directing the practitioners' work in London, before situating the project in an understanding of the way in which space is produced (Lefebvre 1991, Smith 1984). Rather than simply performing artistic projects in an unconventional location, the artists' work is seen as a starting point for the reworking of the production of cities and the political life of urban areas.

In developing the series of workshops, City Mine(d) sought to bring together a range of artistic practitioners working in London's public space. It set out to explore both linkages and common foundations to the practitioners' work, as well as exploring some of the productive differences. Three workshops were held in which these issues were debated; they culminated in a joint statement by City Mine(d) and the artists involved, and a launch-pad for future work in London. From the start, the common thread linking the workshops and the individual practitioners was identified as a concern with the political. For this reason, I place this at the forefront of my analysis. A closely related concern for City Mine(d) was to develop a research agenda around the concept of *Generalized Empowerment* and, specifically, to explore the manner in which urban interventions might seek to work in the space opened up by particular social paradoxes (Moyersoen 2005). Thus, in London, the workshops explored the apparent contradiction between the rich tradition of democratic institutions in the capital and the apparent disinterest in participating in the formal institutions of governance by most of its citizens. Questions were posed around whether artistic practitioners seek to draw attention to this contradiction and whether they find such paradoxes to be productive starting points for their work. These findings would then feed into further research on the theme of

Generalized Empowerment.

Whilst focussing on the specificities of the London workshops and the experiences of the practitioners in intervening in London's public space, the paper makes a broader argument about urban interventions and the productive synergies with the writings of geographers on the urbanisation of nature and the production of space. After a brief introduction to the context of the workshops, I draw together the findings, supplementing these with insights from individual interviews with the practitioners. I argue that urban interventions should be viewed as particular democratic projects; as methodological tools; as interventions in the contemporary moment; and that they should be understood to be processes rather than one off events. Having rehearsed these positions, I turn to look at the synergies between these concrete practices and slightly more abstract arguments concerning the production of space (Lefebvre 1991, Smith 1984).

London's Urban Interventionists

Six artists and curators were brought together for the initial London workshop. Each either works alone or with a particular artistic collective. The principal collectives involved in the project are *Luna Nera, Transgressive Architecture* and *Terra Incognita*. The six individuals originally brought together were: Gil Doron, Siraj Izhar, Alana Jelinek, Gillian McIver, Hilary Powell and John Jordan. Subsequent workshops broadened participation, Greg Cowan becoming involved in the second workshop and with the final workshop involving individuals from *Proboscis, The House of O'Dwyer, The Gallery of Chance, Space Hijackers* and *The Office for Subversive Architecture.* For each of the participants, politics and art are seen as inextricably intertwined; however, these interrelationships manifest themselves in different ways in the practice of each of them. Thus, although each would claim to privilege neither art nor politics, they could position themselves on a spectrum in relation to the others participating in the project. Whilst striving for work of the highest artistic merit, all viewed the gallery space as too constraining for the public engagements they wished to explore. Indeed, some felt that they were no longer able to work in a gallery space.

For *Luna Nera* the subversion of the gallery space involves transforming derelict and disused spaces in cities into rich exhibits. Rather than merely hanging works of art in unusual places, they strive to work with the total environment of a site, in an attempt to draw attention to forgotten spaces. Very often this involves an intervention in the post-industrial landscape; indeed they characterise their work as post-industrial Baroque. **Gillian McIver** argues that this particular aesthetic, rather than a particular political viewpoint, is what characterises the work of the collective. Their work is described as an attempt to "feed public curiosity about forgotten spaces" and to "expose art in ways that are completely different from the accepted demarcation for art consumption". Specific projects have ranged from an ambitious transformation of the *Midland Hotel* in London termed *The Derelict Sensation* to recent international projects in Russia, Switzerland and the Czech Republic. Understandings of history are crucial to *Luna Nera's* work: this permits what **Hilary Powell** describes as a "creative offering" to the city, an invitation for people to live, work and produce space differently. Powell's own work stems from her engagement with performance art. She has developed specific installations in a London lido, as well as film work on specific urban interventions. As with *Luna Nera's* work,

Powell's interest lies in people's engagement with derelict and forgotten places and their efforts to transform these in innovative participatory ways.

For **Alana Jelinek**, this invitation to think and act differently in space involves a subversion of particular preconceptions about the meanings of urban space. The most ambitious curatorial project she has embarked upon, *Curio,* involved the subversion of the tourist gaze and popular preconceptions about Banglatown in London's East End. Pairing individual artists with people living in the area, she sought to confront stereotypical views of the generations of migration that have shaped the area through a series of public interventions along Hanbury Street. Whilst eager to assert the intertwining of art and politics, Jelinek stresses her lack of faith in institutional change. Politics, she argues, begins from the individual and that person's environment.

Although the outcomes are quite different, the participatory starting point for **Siraj Izhar's** work is similar: interventions work well when they become their own visual ecosystems drawing energy from outside. Izhar's aim is to create inventive ciphers for anyone to be able to work with. The success of a project, he suggests, should be judged by the manner in which it becomes self-sustaining through drawing in the efforts and activities of others. His ambitious *Public Life* project worked particularly effectively in this regard. Originally a squatted toilet in the East End, it became a public gallery, bar, exhibition space and creative meeting place. Siraj's recent work, similarly, has sought to open up new spaces for participation. His award-winning plan for a living memorial to Ken Saro-Wiwa is a Carbon c60 molecule constructed out of three spheres 7 metres in diameter. In addition, a "living memorial server" will be open to the public. This will be a search engine that continuously searches for links on environmental justice and civil liberty. These will be communicated to people through poetry and sms text. The aim is to maximise participation in the living memorial, which is able to measure its environment and communicate with the public through its spheres. The very fact that the memorial lays itself open to being taken over by its participants contains some of the most suggestive and interesting possibilities. It becomes a facilitator of democratic participation in environmental justice, lying at the intersection of art, politics and the informational society.

Gil Doron's practice with *Transgressive Architecture* is targeted at what he perceives as the threats to public space in cities. This emerges from an interest in the derelict or dead zones of cities. Paradoxically, these teem with unexpected, illicit life. He highlights the proliferation of laws and bylaws that now delimit particular activities in cities, and he stresses the rights of homeless people, sex workers and minority groupings to co-habit the same space as families. Above all Doron's work challenges the sanitisation of London's public space. For Doron, an intervention is defined by its oppositional nature. Interventions draw attention to boundaries through transgressing them. They seek to redefine public space along more participatory lines. Through both his own research and his academic teaching, Doron seeks to explore transgressive spaces and to challenge the boundaries that enclose them.

Gil's interest in urban nomads is shared by **Greg Cowan** whose work seeks to make better sense of mobile architectures of protest. Asserting the importance of interventions in physical space, Cowan draws on linkages between virtual and real space. This intersection is something explored repeatedly in the work of **Christian Nold**. Nold's work uses the tools of the informational society to generate more participatory urban spaces. Having worked on artistic engagements with the surveillance society around

closed circuit television cameras, he has subsequently turned his attention to *BioMapping*. Here, Nold invites people to wear both a lie detector and a Global Positioning System as they take a walk through a particular area of a city. The results are detailed maps of emotional stimuli. The lie detector, so frequently used as an oppressive tool of the surveillance society is thereby hijacked and transformed into a tool for participatory mapping of a city.

Urban Interventions as Democratic Projects

Whilst the starting point of City Mine(d)'s research into London is the paradox that develops around the thickness of democratic institutions in the city and the apparent apathy exhibited towards these institutions by those living there, the understanding of democracy mobilised in the urban interventions discussed moves in quite different directions from conventional understandings of democratic practice. Indeed several of the projects seek to question the roots of representative democracy, developing, in contrast, a participatory and direct understanding of democratic change.

Urban interventions consist of an invitation to people to participate in the making of cities in different ways. Both the interviews and the workshops for this research show the scepticism felt by practitioners towards current institutions of government. These are viewed as wholly unsatisfactory in effecting the political transformations necessary to make cities more liveable. Local government is frequently viewed as a facilitator of the privatisation of public space through the sale of public facilities and the manipulation of bylaws that exclude marginalised groups. Several practitioners' individual experiences attempting to work with local government departments had clearly left them feeling scarred. Projects had been developed, only for a local authority's permission to have been revoked at the last minute.

However, this by no means rules out forms of collaboration with local government if such collaboration is driven by a genuinely shared agenda. City Mine(d)'s innovative work in Brent Borough – a 3km network of tubing was constructed along which message-bearing ping pong balls could be fired – is indicative of this. Supported by Brent Borough Council, this project brought disparate community centres together in a converstational process few had previously experienced. Whilst the messages were collected and delivered to the head of Brent council, City Mine(d)'s intention was to develop a process rather than an end product. Again, this differs from some understandings in local government of popular participation coming through a two-yearly trip to the polls. The Ping Pong Project develops a far less quantifiable form of democratic participation, seeking to engage exactly those who are unlikely to vote in local government elections.

For Giles Lane of *Proboscis* there is no inherent politics or democratic good within urban interventions. Instead, for Lane, the value of urban interventions lies in their facilitation of listening, especially between groups who might not normally come into contact with each other. Reacting against what he perceives to be an arrogant assumption that urban interventions can give people voice, he suggests that artists could be particularly effective in ensuring dignity for those marginalised groups struggling to be listened to. He cites a project working in an estate in Hounslow in which Treasury department representatives accompanied Proboscis to speak with residents of the estate prior to its redevelopment. Lane argues persuasively that the apparent neutrality of artists

permits such a process to take place.

The practitioners brought together in the workshops agree that their work is far less about communicating a specific message and much more about nurturing a public sphere in which dissonance is valued and protected. Some feel that the "post-political consensus" had neutered debate, sanitising the productive differences between opposing points of view.

Urban Interventions as Methodological Tools

Such a view of democracy emphasises the importance of finding points of traction from which people are able to express and act upon the everyday politics they live. Apathy is not a sign of general contentment with the ways in which cities work. Instead, it reflects the fact that the conventional spectrum of political parties fails to speak to the concerns of the majority. The starting point for many of the interventions was necessarily the politics of everyday life. In order to find ways in which people might be able to gain expression for such a politics, and engage with the issues that really matter to people, practitioners must either be well-acquainted with an area, or they must first strive to capture a sense of the history and politics, the ambience, indeed the personality of an area through a period of research.

Several artists choose to limit their practice to the areas they know the best – their local communities. For Jelinek, the ability to offer something to her local community with *Curio*, and the intimate knowledge she already had of the area, made it the success it was. Others, however, saw interventions as a useful methodological tool for exploring different contexts. For this reason, Gil Doron views urban interventions as a radical but missing link in architectural practice. Interventions insist on giving due weight to the context that is so often missing from architectural work. Gillian McIver noted the centrality of this preliminary process to the work of *Luna Nera.* For its work, historical context, and in-depth research, is fundamental to particular interventions. She describes this in relation to a current project being developed in Prague to highlight the huge rise in car use in the city.

There is a tradition to such exploratory work in the city, whether in the radical academic context or in the European artistic avant-garde. In Geography, Bill Bunge's (1971) leadership of expeditions to the inner city were an earlier attempt to transform academic understandings of urban areas in order to facilitate more effective political strategising. With the European avant-garde the most obvious precursors lie in the situationist tactic of dérive or drift. Practitioners would attempt to capture the hidden ambience of different areas through directed walking. The subsequent psycho-geographical wanderings of a range of practitioners have renewed interest in such tactics (Sinclair 1997, see also Pinder 2005) and the writings of Michel de Certeau (1984) have confirmed the everyday politics in the seemingly banal activity of walking. For Robyn of *Space Hijackers* the exploration of this context through urban interventions also has the radical effect of beginning to shift boundaries. He cites a recent project in which interventionists installed park benches in an area being cleansed of such facilities. Whilst potentially illegal, the act served to question unpopular bylaws and discover their porosity.

Urban Interventions and the Contemporary Moment

The latter helps to emphasise some of the specific ways in which urban interventions engage with the contemporary moment. Urban space, several argued, is increasingly laced with bylaws and tools of surveillance that delimit everyday democratic participation in the politics of cities. Whilst there is a long history of such encroachments on public space, Gil Doron feels there is something specific about the way in which it is taking place at the moment. He argues that the intersection of gentrification and the apparent transformation of the private sphere of the home have resulted in an unprecedented attempt to manipulate and control public space. With home life seeming to be more open than ever to the informational networks that now knit communities together, people feel increasingly vulnerable in their own homes. Being more easily regulated by local government bylaws, public space becomes an easier target. There is therefore an odd reversal of private and public space.

Again, Nold's work is instructive here. Many of his more recent interventions emerge from a specific interest in the informational society. He recounts an experience of being followed home by six different closed circuit television cameras. This prompted thoughts about some form of an intervention and he embarked on a project in which a helium balloon was tied to a closed circuit television pole. The subsequent 'dance' between the balloon and the camera, as the latter tried to focus on the movements of the former, produced an intriguing display located at the interstices of the informational and the physical. Crowds gathered to see the intervention and were invited to reflect on the powers that lie behind the anonymous technology of the camera. The surveillance society produces both new challenges for urban interventions as well as new resources in the city for manipulating this. Nold sees the present interest in urban interventions as being a new phase in the electronic civil disobedience movement that emerged in the 1990s. The interest of earlier civil disobedience had been in working with the networked forms of power that appeared to be on the rise. Now he describes the importance placed on discovering the locus of power and intervening in this. Public space thereby comes to the fore. Greg Cowan describes a contrasting event in Melbourne immediately subsequent to the invasion of Iraq. A body count of civilian deaths resulting from the invasion was projected onto a Parliament building in the city, prompting people to think about the forgotten dead. Again, the intervention is a physical one, but one permitted by the thickness of informational networks now weaving different places together.

The physicality of interventions is clearly important to many practitioners. Cowan describes a rising frustration with interventions in virtual space, speaking of how an autonomous zone in material space provides far greater possibilities than an autonomous zone on the net. The former offers much greater potential for engagement. Again, he speaks of a frustration with the internet petition and a desire to do something material. This is echoed by Siraj Izhar who describes the increase in forms of representation in contemporary society. Working with physical infrastructures challenges politics in a way not possible using the plethora of forms of representation[1]. However, again, his work explores the interstices of the material and the virtual. His living memorial to Ken Saro-Wiwa thereby invites people to communicate with the bits and bytes implanted in the large spheres making up the memorial. Everyday people are able to converse, hijack and

[1] There are interesting links with Debord's notion of the spectacle here. Whilst Debord argued in favour of detournement and turning the spectacle back on itself through the development of situations, Izhar seems to differentiate between virtual and physical spectacles.

transform the memorial into something unexpected and new, through using the everyday technology of the mobile phone.

Urban Interventions as Process

The memorial builds on Izhar's interest in urban interventions as processes. He speaks of a frustration with earlier interventions that had been typified by an overemphasis on the one-off event. Instead, his current interest lies in how dominant ways of thinking and acting might be challenged through the ongoing contestation posed by urban interventions. A Gramscian war of position is being fought, he suggests. Urban interventions are crucial tactics in the struggle against hegemony. Public Life, S_11, and XYZ, three of Izhar's previous projects all represent attempts to try and draw energy from popular participation in upturning the hegemonic processes at work in the city.

Similarly, Jim Segers describes City Mine(d)'s work in such process-based ways. The groundwork of bringing different stakeholders together in Brent Borough in order for the Ping Pong Project to take place was as important as the end product – the network along which the balls could be fired. For Segers, one-off events, can actually play into powerful interests by serving the forms of gentrification that urban interventions so frequently wish to contest. He expresses the fear that working with the built environment rather than the power relations that make up this environment results in a dangerous game with real estate markets.

In *Luna Nera's* work, history is clearly amongst the most important process to be explored and a process that particular interventions might seek to work with. For Doron, however, the act of transgression is itself a process that undermines the eventism of previous interventions. His work around Russell Square in London has consisted of architectural competitions for more participatory transformations of the Square, planning applications for these, a series of articles on the Square and an ongoing engagement with the area. Much of his interest lies in the manner in which processes of time and space intersect. Thus, he speaks of his interest in the manner in which architects might seek to delay planning in an area such that a transgressive space is able to develop of its own accord. Urban natures begin to teem in such forgotten "dead zones".

Within such an understanding of the city, there are some interesting crossovers with earlier writings by Walter Benjamin on the dream collective (the real city is contained within the endless flow of dreams), Georg Simmel (in which the distinctiveness of the city is the rapid flow of interactions) and Georg Lukacs (in which the processes making up particular forms (such as the city) are the most important starting points for an analysis). There are also clear links with the dialectical understandings of the city developed by David Harvey (1996, 2000) and Neil Smith (1984, 1995). It is to the latter that I will now turn. My aim in doing this is to develop the radical synergies between the concrete work of urban interventions and the abstract theorisations of the production of space.

Urban Interventions as Entry Points into the Urbanisation of Nature

"By its actions, this society no longer accepts space as a container, but produces it; we don not live, act and work 'in' space so much as by living, acting and working we produce space."

Neil Smith (1984), Uneven Development

"…what has happened is that capitalism has found itself able to attenuate (if not resolve) its internal contradictions for a century, and consequently, in the hundred years since the writing of *Capital*, it has succeeded in achieving 'growth'. We cannot calculate at what price, but we do know the means: by occupying space, by producing a space."
Henri Lefebvre (1974), The Survival of Capitalism

Henri Lefebvre's writings are by far the most common, although not necessarily the simplest, starting point for an understanding of the production of space. Not only did Lefebvre coin the term 'the production of space' but his influence on the situationist movement and a broad range of academic disciplines has ensured an enduring legacy. Lefebvre's argument is both bold and striking: in the production of space lies an answer to the enduring question for marxist theorists as to how capitalism survived its apparent contradictions. In short, capitalism survives through producing space. Any challenge to socio-economic structures must therefore confront and intervene in the way in which space is produced. The argument is rooted in Lefebvre's observations of the urban-based social movements developing in Paris in the 1960s. In particular, the decline in work-place politics associated with de-industrialisation had shifted struggles from a politics of production to a politics around the reproduction of the relations of production. Central to the success or failure of this reproduction is urban space.

Whilst concurring with many of Lefebvre's key points, Neil Smith's work on the production of space begins from a different position and journeys towards some quite distinctive conclusions. Relatively neglected in the work on urban interventions, and totally neglected in the academic resurgence of interest in the arts of urban exploration, I would like to suggest that Smith's theses might have some important lessons for our understanding of urban interventions in London. This work fits particularly well within City Mine(d)'s proposed agenda on *Generalized Empowerment.*

The claim that space is "produced" is only made in Smith's work after having explored the way in which nature itself can be said to be produced. Smith's argument here is that it makes little sense to divide the world into discrete spheres of 'pristine', untouched nature and human society, when both are so fundamentally interwoven through the everyday activities of living, working and playing. Similarly, it makes little sense to naturalise space when it is continually reworked according to the dominant ways in which society organises itself. The city is a manifestation of this claim. Rather than the enemy of nature, an urban area should be viewed as a particular "socio-natural assemblage" (see also Harvey 1996), a particular working of nature into a produced space. In capitalist societies, with the increase in importance of production for profit, the defining feature of produced natures, and thereby the urban landscape, has become exchange value. Through making such an argument, Smith seeks to counter dualistic understandings of nature and society and turn this towards a dialectic understanding of the internal relations that comprise socio-natural assemblages. Indeed, not only is a conception of nature as something outside cities conceptually off the mark, it is also politically disabling. In contrast to the way in which the "environment debate" is currently framed, Smith's writings lead us into a view of nature that is in contradistinction to those that claim it is something to be saved, defended or protected. Instead, the 'natural' is something made out of particular interactions, power relations and forms of organisation. These can be reworked in particular progressive or regressive, environmentally just or unjust ways. As

Swyngedouw (forthcoming) has recently argued, this is one way of shattering the dull post-political consensus around sustainability. It brings to the fore the *politics* of the environment. The city is emerging as a pre-eminent battleground in this politics.

Within geographical research, there has been a limited renaissance of Smith's work, especially in the writings of those interested in the political ecology of cities. Kaika and Swyngedouw (2000) have developed this into a conceptual argument around the urbanisation of nature in order to convey a sense of the myriad ways in which nature is produced in an urban context. Harvey's (1996) interest in the environmental justice movement adds one important element to such understandings through linking the production of nature to a grassroots politics of everyday lived environments. In this final section, I would like to suggest that the project initiated by City Mine(d) adds another vital element to this understanding. It creates opportunities and offers invitations for tactical interventions into the urbanisation of nature and the production of space that are, to relate this back to the preceding sections: broadly democratic; methodologically rich; specific to the contemporary moment; and that develop the process-based understanding of urban space suggested by Smith.

For Smith, as well as for Swygedouw and Heynen, the conceptual understanding of the production of urban environments is targeted at developing a more genuinely 'humanising' geography of cities. Absolutely fundamental to this is the democratisation of the socio-natural relationships that comprise urban space. As I hope to have shown, the starting point for urban interventions is very often to invite this very democratisation, to subvert conventional understandings of democratic participation, and to open public space up to a plethora of dissonant voices. In this regard, it provides a political entry point to the work on the production of urban natures. The need for this democratisation is shown to be more pressing in the interventions themselves, given the rise in surveillance, the commodification of space through gentrification and, above all, through constellations of powerful interests that seek to ensure that people behave in certain ways in cities. In Smith's view, this behaviour is also shaped by a constellation of social relationships that privilege, amongst other things, the realisation of value through capitalist production and exchange. The challenge confronted by activists, therefore, is to define ways of transforming these relationships in ways that might challenge capitalist hierarchies in democratic ways. Modestly, urban interventions strive to do this. They invite people to participate in the making of cities in a way that is not based on the realisation of profits but rather on direct democratic principles. Alternative forms of associations are necessarily explored.

Reflecting what is again a genuine modesty, this is City Mine(d)'s intention when they suggest their aim is to "reshuffle" power relations in the city. What on the surface appears to be a banal invitation for people to write messages on ping pong balls is actually a process leading to new forms of communication, new forms of relating amongst a specific community and, potentially, a more humanising geography. The outcome of the ping pong project depends on how people seek to transform the network themselves. Siraj Izhar's living memorial to Ken Saro-Wiwa, similarly, is an invitation to relate to one another in a way that undermines the hegemonic carbon-based economy currently dominating, as well as seeking to undermine the commodified art world. Izhar places at the forefront of his work a desire for people *to relate to one another more directly*. In *Luna Nera's* work, we are invited to consider the history of social relationships comprising the post-industrial landscape and to consider participatory

inroads into making space differently. Again, the subversion of the commoditised space of the gallery is implicit. In contradistinction to some of the more recent work on the psycho-geographies of cities, this work does not depend on the writings or the practice of one single author. It relies on the social interaction between different people, exploring the making of cities together.

This also relates to the claims made about the methodological richness of urban interventions. Not only do they provide inroads into making better sense of context for the practitioner (and also for the academic) they offer ways in which all city dwellers can explore the context of the places in which they live. In doing so, the relationships that comprise city space are brought to the fore. In Nold's work, the powerful interests that seek to survey and monitor deviant behaviour through the closed circuit television camera are highlighted through his choreographing of the performance between a CCTV camera and a helium-filled balloon. More directly, his *BioMapping* project provides people with the resources through which they might be able to remap communities themselves. The cartographic representations of emotional stimuli suggest ways in which people might be able to map psychological relationships in space in opposition to the dominant exchange relation. Clearly, such a mapping of both the internal and the external relations comprising space and nature is crucial to Smith's work. Urban interventions provide a practical means by which this counter-mapping might progress. Importantly, they supplement this with potential ways of subverting the dominant relationships.

Similarly, if, through developing a historical materialist approach, Smith's work seeks to show how space and nature are produced in distinctive ways at distinctive moments, the workshops suggested ways in which the specificity of the contemporary moment might be brought to the fore. In this regard, *Luna Nera's* interventions seek to relate the contemporary moment to the historical processes through which the post-industrial landscape has been produced. Powell's work similarly invites us to consider her installations as an exorcism of haunted memories. Echoing Walter Benjamin's angel of history, Powell's installations are turned towards the past. As the storms of time blow us towards the future, she draws our attention to the huge piles of rubble that we term "progress". Nold, Izhar and Cowan all work in different ways in the contemporary interstices developing between virtual and physical space. They seek to highlight the way in which power is currently configured, as a step on the road to contesting it. In addition, there is much scope within Smith's work to consider the importance placed by practitioners on the relationships comprising virtual space and the links and intersections with physical space.

Importantly, such work can be seen to develop a specific process-based understanding of the city remarkably similar to that proposed by Smith. Urban space, the practitioners argue, is not made out of single events. Cities are produced through interactions between different people and different interests. These interactions are best understood to be part of a particular process – the production of space through the urbanisation of nature. Through seeking to move urban interventions away from an event-based understanding of the making of cities, the workshops demonstrated how the internal relations that comprise urban space can be reshaped in such process-based ways. Crucial to the development of such a strategy, I would suggest, is City Mine(d) itself. From the development of its *Network Book for Urban P/arts: 42 Initiatives Capturing London's Public Space,* it has sought to facilitate linkages between different practitioners in the city. City Mine(d) has sought to develop approaches to urban interventions that

ensure each intervention is more than an isolated event. In this way, the modest NGO serves as a hub for the development of the humanising geographies of which Smith writes and of which, I regard the urban interventions to be concrete manifestations.

The value in Smith's approach and the lively intersections with the work on urban interventions should, I hope, be somewhat clearer. Smith brings a sense of the politicisation of space and of the relational way in which cities are produced. This permits a radical rethink of the taken-for-granted-ordinariness of the built environment. Buildings, transport networks, pipes and pylons are produced out of particular constellations of interests. Focussing on the processes that make these things in particular ways is of central importance in better understanding the space of the city. Interventions, whilst working from similar starting points, suggest productive entry points into re-directing these processes in democratic ways. In addition, Smith's work suggests ways in which we can begin to tease out the myriad ways in which the space of the city is produced out of the politicised urbanisation of nature. It suggests an embryonic environmental politics for the city. In this way, I think there are many more possible areas of cross-fertilisation. By drawing attention to the everyday urban environments in which people live work and play, by demonstrating how these are politicised, Smith suggests a new terrain of analysis that might be explored through urban interventions. Just as the environmental justice movement drew energy from grassroots anger over urban environmental injustices, so, urban interventions might prove to be catalytic in such struggles for socio-ecological justice.

Conclusion

In previous research projects, I have often found myself reaching pessimistic conclusions about the politics of the contemporary moment. Having mapped what I perceive to be the relations of power comprising the environments of particular cities, it is often hard to find inspiring examples of progressive change. It has been truly refreshing to work with City Mine(d) in following the London workshops on urban interventions. To use the now hackneyed aphorism of Antonio Gramsci, the projects show a true optimism of the will in the face of a pessimism of the intellect. As several authors have suggested, however, it is conceptually lazy to fall back on Gramsci's maxim without also changing our own praxis (see Harvey 2000). What is needed is a renewed optimism of the intellect, or better still a renewed synergy between theory and practice. In the latter part of this paper, I hope to have initiated a conversation between a relatively neglected body of academic work and the practice of performing urban interventions in London. Both, I suggest, have the potential of transforming the other in positive ways. Urban interventions provide both methodological tools and political tactics for challenging our understandings of the production of space. Academic writings on the urbanization of nature provide both suggestive pointers and conceptual developments that might take urban interventions in new directions. In this way, a new critical and dialectical urbanism might be possible in which theory and practice, art and politics are intertwined in innovative and magical ways.

"By bonding, by wedding critical thought to political struggle and action, everyday people – people like you and me – can construct real cities from below, not inherit phony utopias from above. We can inhabit cities made livable by people struggling to live"

Andy Merrifield (2002), Dialectical Urbanism

Alex Lotus
Department of Geography
Royal Holloway, University of London

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