



**Did Someone Say Participate? An Atlas of Spatial Practice**

MARKUS MIESEN and SHUMON BASAR, editors

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The well-crafted manifesto *performs* ideas rather than merely states them, advancing understanding with models or tools that put meaning into practice,

and communicating how meaning expresses value through *metaphor*. In the case of *Did Someone Say Participate?* the idea that architecture prevails over the conception and production of space is scrutinized in the wake of shifting cultural, political and material practices, and is presented as a research “report” the findings of which argue for new paradigms in architectural research. In fact, the book is a pedagogical extension of the newly established Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths College, London, and showcases the interests of at least six of its Ph.D. candidates, including the book’s editors, and the program’s director, Eyal Weizman. The two dozen other contributors include an international range of activists, artists, architects, curators, critics, and theorists, notably, Keller Easterling of Yale, Joseph Grima of the Storefront for Art and Architecture, and Hans Ulrich Olbrist of the Serpentine Gallery. Through a meandering across writings and projects, the book’s contributions construct a field for social and political discourse within which speculations on their spatialized logics emerge. Taken as a whole, the book is as much an experiment in what architectural research can produce as it is a coming-out party, but this makes for decidedly skewed results.

As a polemic, *Did Someone Say Participate?* arises from the significant contention that the architectural field lacks the disciplinary dexterity to participate deeply with other disciplines in current debates about space, thereby facing a precarious future. This stasis is an entirely legitimate concern. Exploring what robust models of participation’ are possible in order to make multidisciplinary research a relevant dimension of architecture is both vital and urgent, and echoes the realization among academics and practitioners that the disciplinary boundaries historically defining architecture have produced strange tactics of interactions with other fields. They can loosely be sorted into three

categories: an overt tactic of reactionary self-preservation in which boundaries are thickened by exalting architecture's prowess over space; a subversive tactic that quietly infiltrates other, usually scientific, disciplines, sleuths for models of research and practice that appear translatable, and then assimilates them as architectural models; and finally, a radical tactic, akin to what Easterling here calls the "cunning of stupidity," that oscillates "between a resolute belief that wishes to deny information and a remarkable shrewdness in gathering information."

If we are to support *Participate's* manifesto, we must also consider how well it performs as research itself, not as a metaphor for participation, but as a model for producing meaning about participation. This is perhaps the book's greatest weakness, and one to which the editors should have paid closer attention, given the high ideological stakes of their desire to "pulverize" traditional distinctions between research and practice. Several theses are too lightly glossed over in Miessen and Basar's introductory essay. Seven terms are presented as the book's conceptual binding agents, but as interrogatives, not as statements: *Flatness?* as an overly simplified metaphor for problematizing space; *Control?* as a ruse for disciplinary surrender; *Empowered?* as reactionary hype for outsider subversion; *Consensus?* as static representations of deterritorialization; *Atlas?* as a wandering itinerary of research practices; *Participants?* as a think-tank of collaborators; and *Tactics?* as naive attitudes of knowledge production. Together, these terms define a problematically singular notion of participation. So rather than expand each term to broader disciplinary influences, they are instead constricted, and force the contributing works to serve a fundamentally flawed argument about participation. As a further case in point, the editors emphasize the notion that to participate is to "trespass," to *knowingly* violate boundaries between fields on the inside of a particular

logic, and other fields on the outside. The editors take the position that the field of architecture is the outsider, but this implies that the burden to reform notions of spatial practice still originates inside our own disciplinary boundaries. With respect to the categories of disciplinary interaction mentioned earlier, the editors seem to reconstruct the very argument they intended to defeat, i.e., disciplinary self-preservation.

Read on their own terms, a number of contributions are exciting in their curiosity to explore the edges of architectural research on a global scale—from Ground Zero to Gaza to Mexican guardhouses to Mumbai urban artifacts. These include Sedan Jovanovic Weiss's (a.k.a. School of Missing Studies) ontological analysis of balkanization; Michael Hirsch's swerves through contemporary conceptions of Parisian history, politics and culture; and most poignantly, Hans Ulrich Obrist's charming riff on participation as an act of knowledge curation, not only in metaphorical terms, but as a model that produces disciplinary transformation through emergent forms of knowledge production.

But it is Shumon Basar's piece on "the professional amateur" that best exemplifies the challenges that the architectural discipline faces when it "trespasses" other fields, intentionally or not, without the proper models to escape the disorientation of metaphor. Regrettably, he eliminates any rich argument that might consider how architectural practice landed in this current cultural crisis to begin with. His example of self-organization as a model of participation begins to suggest how disciplines might mutually reinforce and adapt to one another, but in the end it merely entertains, as he describes what makes a great rock concert moment between a pop singer and a live audience that overtakes his performance. This flimsy stuntwork baits us into the same old trick of metaphor. Trespassers beware of take-overs ahead.

Petia Morozov

#### Note

1. If we accept current philosophical and biological notions of individuation (Massumi, Varela, et al.), i.e., that "participation" is in fact a perpetual state of modulation between the self and the world, through complex causalities that produce various scales of sensing and therefore multiple world views, then the question is not *if* we have or should participate, but *how* we have or should participate, such that no single world view is privileged. Given this, "participation" as a general concept must first be allowed the space to be thoroughly problematized across many perspectives before it can be declared a "problem" in need of solving.