

Urban Appropriation Strategies:

Exploring Space-making Practices in Contemporary European Cityscapes

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Mapping the Teufelsberg

Or, How to Embody History



Photo Credit: Anton Roland Laub, September 2016

Following an invitation from the Teufelsberg (EN: Devil Mountain) association in Berlin, which is dedicated to the preservation of this historical site and the development of an arts and culture program, I carried out the first edition of a «Performance Laboratory» in collaboration with the author and media theorist Rafael Dernbach and the dancer and producer Petterson Costa. At the core of this Laboratory was not only the experimentation with different ways of how to engage the body in performance, but also how to approach a mythical and almost-occupied place such as Teufelsberg. For most of us, Teufelsberg was a predominantly unknown and rather «unreachable» place in the city, far away from our personal geographies and experienced pathways. For that reason, we decided to work with the format of a «performative expedition» giving us on one hand, the chance to discover and explore the hidden spots and angles of Teufelsberg and on the other, the opportunity to establish a context beyond the conventional art- and theatre spaces of Berlin. Within this context and through the modes of performance, our goal was to investigate the notions of site specificity, urban ecology and community practice.

During eight days (from the 3rd to the 10th of September 2016), a group of artists coming from diverse backgrounds ¹, met everyday at the S-Bahn Station Grunewald in Charlottenburg in order to walk up together to Teufelsberg (which is about 3,0 kilometres away and takes around 30 minutes). Each day, a participant proposed a different walk or way of relating to the group, the passerby and the surroundings. One of these walks, for example, was a silent and slow one that took us around one hour and half to do, but that allowed us to observe and deeply sense the environment of the Grunewald (the biggest forest in Berlin). Once we were at Teufelsberg, we spent the rest of the day, investigating specific spots within the area as well as executing various physical and writing exercises. The main purpose of these exercises was to question how bodies and spaces can inscribe themselves into each other. How can a space (or a body) become a medium or an agent for stories and histories? And how does an embodied story or history itself become a written history?

Considering these questions, we elaborated a program that was not only focused on capturing and mapping the unique history of Teufelsberg, but also on creating a collective narrative. For us, this narrative should be based not only on our impressions of the place, but also on the existing (and imaginary) narratives of Teufelsberg. Because if there is something you cannot find there, is someone without a story to tell. Nowadays, Teufelsberg has become a contested magnet for Berlin's recent tourism hype. ² The abandoned radar station, the unique view from the highest place in Berlin and the traces of a whole generation of street artists are just some of the reasons for this attraction. At Teufelsberg alternative Berlin seems even more alternative and has kept its occult side. ³ However, most visitors are unaware that not only, was Teufelsberg a radar station during the Cold War, it is also a result from WWII as it mainly consists of debris from the bombing of Berlin. While the mountain after the fall of the wall saw a row of failed and unfinished development initiatives, it also became a place for experiments in alternative living practices. Currently, Teufelsberg is going through an important process of change involving a public debate whether the

place should finally become a public space and memorial or if it should stay in the hands of the investors and capital speculation. 4

In our case, we were one of the first groups that realised a Performance Laboratory at Teufelsberg, except the usual things that happens there: events from big companies, film- and tv shoots, guided tours or special concerts in the Dome. However, I have to point out that we as «intruders» had to adapt completely to the current situation of the place which is still extremely precarious. Beside the small community of artists and adventurers that are trying to build their own infrastructure, there are not any proper places to work, eat or sleep (nor a public toilet) 5. At least, we could use a temporary infrastructure, i.e. a mobile, tiny wooden house called *allerorten* that was installed there for art residencies, as our hub and base. On this basis, we tried to incorporate all these special conditions into our «performative expedition» and working process.

These types of historical, alternative or public spaces, have been important frameworks in my practice, to discuss whether the contemporary body, is extensively losing the perception of what means to be in contact with the environment and other beings, beyond the omnipresence of digital life. This assumption may sound nostalgic at first glance, or as an attempt to return to the times, when humankind was not so affected by (or dependent on) technology. Yet it has become undeniable, that our ways of relating to one another have changed considerably. Specifically the ability of the body to sense, observe and adapt to a certain locality, social field or condition has become and unpredictable and uncertain territory, where the boarders between what is real and what is not are blurred.

By looking at this current phenomenon, I am not intending to either diminish the value and importance of technology in our society or the use of devices in our daily routines. However, to quote Heather Davis & Etienne Turpin:

One problem is that we are adapting so quickly to these new terms and conditions, both by shielding ourselves through various technological apparatuses (for those who can afford to do so) and through ingenious survival strategies, that it is often difficult to remark on these new perceptual and sensorial realities. (Davis & Turpin, 2015 p. 17)

What I am trying to point out, is that the presence of certain technological apparatuses (such as smart phones), may compromise and confine the whole spectrum of a lived experience, especially if it is meant to be physical or rather «embodied». For this reason, I have been pursuing an embodied practice that seeks to enhance our awareness and understanding of ourselves and of the environment, seeing it as an ecological act and a way of intensifying an experience. Doing this, I am trying to counteract the application (and sometimes overuse) of technology in these sensorial experiences, emphasizing the meaning of «embodiment». In the words of Ben Spatz:

To place embodiment before technology is then to remind ourselves that machines, no matter how powerful their effects, involve us only to the extent that they make contact with our experience through the necessary medium of embodiment. (Spatz 2015, p. 12)

Thus, since 2010, I have been working with the concept of *Body Mapping*. At the core of this concept, lies the relationship between the body and space, especially the investigation of how the space might condition the body, and the body the space. Although this relationship has always been intertwined and to some extent, obvious (since the human condition will always be dependent on the space), there are still many unexplored aspects of it. What can happen in the space «in-between»? Which different incidents can appear between the experiences made inside and outside the body? What kind of bodily language can be found for these incidents? These are some of the questions that are pivotal to me.

Here, I am trying to look through this intrinsic space (or frame) by escaping from the common ways of explaining and interpreting what takes place in the body or in the space. In this regard, the idea of engendering «frictions» between the body and space, has become an important strategy to keep the experiences as broad as possible, constantly changing the perspectives. In other words: it is about the attempt to dissolve the borders between the subjectivity of the body and the environment by redefining its way to discern, capture and interpret the world. According to Brian Assumi and Erin Manning, this could mean that:

You entered a mode of environmental awareness in which to perceive is to enact thought, and thought is directly relational. This actively relational thinking is also an expression of the field, but in a different mode than storytelling, poetic or not, with no immediate need for language, satisfying itself at a level with the body's movements. (Assumi, Manning, 2014, p.10)

Attuned with this awareness, the concept of Body Mapping serves also as an artistic, pedagogical and therapeutic tool, to create different cartographies, maps or structures, either from places and social contexts or from personal histories. The main purpose of these cartographies (or maps) is not to produce a direct copy or a detailed inventory of these places, contexts and histories. Instead of doing this, it is about of inventing a panoply (or assemblage) of all the experienced emotions, sensations, impressions, observations and thoughts. Besides, I have also been using this mapping process as a framework to elaborate site specific and collaborative performances. In the centre of these performances or «moments of interaction» lies not only the approach of «embodying» the space, but also of translating it into a performative language.

For this reason, I have been focusing on the idea of training the body as a «translator». On the one hand, this means that the body is seen as a crossover between the different spaces and contexts and on the other, as a vessel for all sorts of signs, signals and interpretations. In this respect, the body is not only trained in its ability to observe, listen and adapt to an environment (and metaphorically speaking, to navigate in the darkness). More than this, the body should be trained in its effort to

find its own gestural language that uncovers the multiple meanings of the outer world by especially being, in the mode and state of performance. Consequently, I am interested in the activation of either verbal or non-verbal communication and negotiation processes that helps the body to engage both socially and spatially. I believe that in Body Mapping, the body occupies and appropriates a space by telling stories in it.

In this regard, I would like to return to the Performance Laboratory at Teufelsberg by applying this notion of «embodiment» as a realm to describe some of our experiences. In the words of Tim Ingold:

It is not just that bodies, as living organisms move. They are their movements. Therefore the knowledge they can have of themselves is inseparable from the sense they have of their own movements. (Ingold, 2012, P. 437)

Thus, I would like to look at these sensory and somatic experiences as a strategy of appropriation and by whether it can be seen as an applicable model to «embody» a historical place such as Teufelsberg.

For this, I choose one specific working field of the program, bodywork. This category or the experimentation with particular body techniques or respectively, «embodied techniques», was the central axis of the program and focused especially on the procedure of physical and acting exercises such as: group improvisations, interventions in the space, five rhythm's classes, yoga and walks 6. The main purpose of these exercises was not only to collect material and ideas for the design of the performance, but also to create a structure where the history of Teufelsberg could be contemplated from within. In doing so, our main goal was to elaborate a *site specific performance* by activating the memory of the place and finding a different approach for such performance. Mike Pearson views this type of performance as:

Site specific performance is ostensibly predicated upon phenomenological encounter and the demonstration or translation of its effect into forms of physical expression or associated account, the engagement of the performer at site is in essence ergonomic - body-to-environment, body-to-body. A simple premise here might be to regard site, including its existing and temporally installed elements, as workplace. (Pearson, 2010, p. 171)

However, we did not want to use the workplace of Teufelsberg as a site for creating a site specific performance with the common theatrical means of storytelling. Instead of reproducing a story that already exists in each corner of the place, we wanted to work with the idea of rewriting or even better, «unwriting» the place. How this might happen, seemed quite abstract at first glance. But there were ways-of enabling this vision, for example by seeing the place or workplace as a white surface that hides within its gaps, multiple stories. Therefore, we chose to work with the principle of reduction and stillness, i.e. that most of the exercises were directed towards the idea of creating a

spatial experience and relationship with the place. By doing this, we decided to also reduce the amount of speaking during the exercises. This strategy was not only applied to enhance the ability of the body to observe and sense the place, but also as a way to decrease the external amenities and to create a type of silence central to my own personal practice: a silence in which one can learn how to listen to the body and the environment by expanding the notions of space and time. In doing so, we generated a feeling of belonging to the place, even if only temporary.

In other words, I would claim that the applied appropriation strategy in this performative and somatic experience may be seen as a model to transform the notion of «site specificity» itself. One of the prevalent feelings was that not only did the place leave traces in our bodies, but also our bodies left impressions on the place. What the graffiti sprayers do there every day, by imprinting their signatures on the walls, we did by «embodying» and performing the place. We did not extensively change the landscape of Teufelsberg, yet we were able to shift the perspective upon the place by acting not as a mere tourist, but as a temporary inhabitant. This state of being did not allow us to appropriate the Teufelsberg as if it was ours, but at least it drastically changed our physical and mental distance to it. Because the more one overcomes the distances to a place, the more one becomes part of it.

With this idea in mind, we presented a final performance (about 40 minutes) for an invited audience on the last day of the Lab 7. Starting point from this performance was a so called «space script» based on the one hand, on the notes, thoughts and drawings that we had collected during the process and on the other, on the exercises of the program. After each day, we exchanged our little red notebooks (that we called passport as well) in order to document (or rewrite) about our thoughts and experiences made at Teufelsberg. In doing so, the main intention of this script, was not only to find a narrative that merge our single voices with the ones found during the course. Beside that, we wanted to create a collective experience in which the audience was invited to take part as well. Therefore we used the second floor of the Graffiti Museum (where we also had our improvised studio for the bodywork) as a basis to elaborate in total eight scenes (or actions), each one for a different spot of the space. From all these scenes, only the last one was a speech based on a text by Rafael Dernbach:

In ten years Teufelsberg will look different to what it looks right now. A mountain of fragments and speculation will have turned to a mountain of translation and healing. It will have become a space for unclaimed experiences, unclaimed emotions and unclaimed relationships. As the infrastructure is mostly an affective one, there will be a community of curiosity that invites all beings attracted to learn and form and translate. Relate and translate. As such the mountain will have grown from a laboratory for technology for a post-modern, post-industrial, post-machistic world into a laboratory of anticipation, a place that helps and establishes relations. The modern Teufelsberg is about divide, the new mountain about relation. A school of senses and relatedness will be established that hides from the increasingly aggressive flows of capital and opacity.

Finally, I cannot tell with certainty if we really became part of the history or the on-going historiography of Teufelsberg. What I can be sure of, however, is that with our sensitive, moving, single bodies and with our «embodied practice» as well, we created a meaningful interaction with this place. In the words of Assumi and Manning:

The site is in the process of apportioning itself out as the body is apportioning itself to it. The site lands itself for the body as much as the body lands the site. The site stretches between a single, two-way movement of potential. Do not presume to know concretely where the person who makes architectural-body sense lies. She lies in the field of her potential. We cannot define where a body begins and where external nature ends. (Assumi, Manning, 2014, p. 24)

Notes

1. I would like to mention the names of the Lab Participants: Anna Semenova (RU), Erika Schwarz (BR), Alexandra Lucas (FR), Julia Salem (BR), Juliana Gennari (BR) and Hunter Lee Daniel (US). They were selected through different networks and by sending a short letter of intention. My main criteria, was not only to work with artists interested in the field of site specific performance, but also with people willing to experience their own body. Here I have to say, that without the efforts and engagement of these participants, this Lab would not have been possible. Beside that, I also would like to thank the collaborators Richard Rabensaat (DE) - founder of the Teufelsberg association and Oliver Euchner (GE) who gave the five rhythms class.
2. The term “hype” is used here to point out, that masses of people are coming to Berlin looking for the traces of an Era marked by the division of the city and the conflict between East and West. Due to the fact that Teufelsberg was built during this Era, it is no wonder that it has become a coveted (or hidden) spot, even if it is not part of the common city tours – anyhow, as the area is in the middle of a nature reserve, tourists will never be allowed to come to Teufelsberg with for example, buses.
3. The meaning of alternative in this context, is related to the idea that Berlin is and has always been a fertile ground for other and rather non-commercial types of lifestyles. That is why so many artists have moved to the city in the past twenty years..., and even if most of the places are taken now, they are still coming (probably in search of a myth). In this regard, Teufelsberg can be seen as one of the few places left in Berlin, where it is still possible to try out new and utopian ideas.
4. Since 2016, certain areas of Teufelsberg have been open for the general public (by paying an entrance fee). See here the official website for more information: <http://neue.teufelsberg-berlin.eu>.
5. One of the maybe most adventurous happenings of the Lab, beside our encounter with the wild pigs in the forest, was the sleep over at Teufelsberg. As we could not find a place to camp all together (especially because there are other people doing the same), each one of us had to sleep in another spot: a tree house, an unfinished studio and at our tiny residency place as well. This experience did not only give us the chance to inhabit the place for one night, but it also reminded us what an expedition actually means... The day after we were so tired, that I decided to do our body work at the Teufelsberg lake by literally practicing «nudism» (something for what the lake is known, especially amongst the gay community).
6. One of the reasons why the focus was put on these techniques and not on others, was not only due to the fact that some of us are trained in them. Beside that, there is a special attribute and link that can be found in all of them: the dissolution of the body-mind duality and thus, the training of an integral practice.
7. For this occasion, I created a cooperation with the platform Theaterscoutings Berlin which is dedicated to the mediation of theatre- and performance pieces of mainly the independent scene in Berlin. See here the website: <http://theaterscoutings-berlin.de> .

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