

## ■ Did Someone Say Participate?

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*Did Someone Say Participate? An Atlas of Spatial Practice*, eds Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar, Revolver, Frankfurt, 2006, 331pp, hb, £12.95, 3 86588 268 4.

*Did Someone Say Participate? An Atlas of Spatial Practice* is a far cry from many of the glossy architectural or sober academic publications associated with its discipline. Its design is a strange hybrid between a geography textbook and one of those sober, Germanic tomes one finds in bookshops while abroad. Its hardback version comes without a slipcover and is printed in muted pastel blue tones, which evokes memories of years spent in classrooms with chalky blackboards. The cover's background illustration is an atlas of the world, flattened into two-dimensional, orange-peel form. However, after a second look one sees that the world has gone awry: India and Mexico float within the same longitude and Australia seems to suffer a hemispheric identity crisis. A visual metaphor for the globalised world, which is discussed at length in the book, the cover evokes a sense of dislocation, and is a good indicator of its contents, which shift and provoke throughout.

Once inside, the design continues to surprise and unsettle in equal proportion. The text is set in Olive Nouveau, a typeface designed the Abake collective, whose 'war alphabet' features in the opening and final pages of the book. The use of a sans serif font is unusual for a book of this length. Also, the olive-ish colour (which seems navy to my untrained eye) permeates through the illustrations, lending them a somewhat antiquated feel. A dark border (rendered in the same pigment) on the top of each page gives the sense that the book has been worn by sunlight and shelf dust – a prediction of its eventual destiny? These design features are reminiscent of the type of strategies seen in recent years in Basar and Abake's *Sexy Machinery* journal, in which each issue comprised a

different format. While the experimental design may seem annoying or contrived at times, I appreciate that the book itself becomes an object of investigation and inquiry rather than an accepted and unquestioned format.

The title page describes the book as 'a report from the front lines of cultural activism [that] looks at spatial practitioners who actively trespass into neighbouring or alien fields of knowledge'. This seems a tall order for any publication, but Miessen and Basar deliver on the promise. The book contains a wide array of contributors and therefore practices: from architects and artists to writers, curators and activists, each entry travels into new territory. This makes for a read that is at times exciting and humorous, if uneven.

For example, Eyal Weizman's piece examines the architecture, politics and power struggles involved with the Gaza occupations and evacuations. Weizman's polemic has resulted in a ban on his practising architecture in his native Israel, which is an indication of the power and relevance of his message. This might be compared to the interview between Brendan McGetrick and Rebecca Gomperts, the health activist and 'pro-choice extremist' who runs 'Woman on Waves', a floating abortion clinic that offers assistance to women in countries where the procedure is banned. Gomperts and Weizman represent the unyielding positions necessary in debates as heated as women's reproductive rights and the conflict in the Middle East. Other contributions suffer in comparison to these very prescient causes, for example Françoise Roche's 'Don't Fuck the Authorshiplessness', which is a pithy and intractable interlude. The text examines the idea of the disappearing author, firing quotes from Samuel Beckett and Jean-François Lyotard, but remains frustratingly quixotic in its message. Perhaps this is the author's intention, but it doesn't help the reader navigate its muddled and shallow waters.

The 'curated' artist interventions are among the most successful aspects of *Did Someone Say Participate?* Miessen introduces Armin Linke's photographs of architecture from zones of conflict: from barriers at the G8 summit in Genoa and prisons in Argentina and the UK, to

barbed-wire boundaries around deceptively twee snow-covered chalets at the World Economic Forum in Davos. While some of these feature congregations of people praying or protesting, the artist's interest is in the gates, fences and barriers that control these crowds.

Miessen's co-editor Basar introduces the Dutch architect and photographer Bas Princen's images of mundane landscapes from various parts of the world. Whether showing an office building in Houston or a private home in Tirana, his photographs emphasise the 'silence that Princen sees around us'. This 'silence', as Basar terms it, is always related to the isolation of the landscapes that Princen locates. These landscapes quietly speak volumes about our tendency to cultivate and control, and ultimately destroy, nature.

One of my favourite pieces in the anthology is the text by Joseph Grima, an architect and member of Multiplicity, a cross-disciplinary team based in Italy. Grima's text, 'Did You Mean: Outsourcing', examines the nature of outsourcing, from the now familiar phenomenon of telephone call centres in China and West Africa to more obscure practices such as the young people who work in computer centres playing 'World of Warcraft' and 'Magic Land'. These lucky punters spend their time creating online currency, including amulets and magic spells, by killing monsters and winning battles during their 12-hour shifts. Grima also discusses the darker side of such practice. He points out the ethical issues around outsourcing, which are perhaps most relevant in the case of pharmaceutical companies conducting drug trials in the developing world. He gives the example of India, where companies can save up to 60% by outsourcing; however, this practice has come under scrutiny after the death of eight people as a result of illegal drug trials.

Grima's text is the best kind of contribution to such a project, for it encompasses a global phenomenon with a serious impact on economies and people with a delightfully dry sense of humour (and all its footnotes are web-based). It is representative of the book itself: with its impossibly long title and range of material, it positions itself within contemporary issues, yet does so



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