



Shumon Basar and Marcus Miessen, *Did Someone Say Participate?*, 2006, MIT Press

Did Someone Say Participate?

MIT Press, 2006
Shumon Basar and
Markus Miessen, Editors

www.didsomeonesayparticipate.com

by Jessica Carew Kraft

On first glance, this hard-bound laminated tome looks like a standard college textbook, destined to a purgatory between required reading and forgotten homework. But *Did Someone Say Participate*, an edited volume of desultory essays on architecture, space and curation, is an inventive, irreverent invitation to get involved in a new paradigm of spatial practice. The days of the Architect, à la Howard Roark, are over it seems, and in place of the monumental designer we now have dilettantes and degree-holding professionals dabbling and dealing in new disciplines. The conventional architectural practice does not address pressing questions of political, social and cultural importance, the editors admonish, so in this book they present new ways of looking at spatial problems.

The compendium is the brainchild of Shumon Basar and Markus Miessen, two young British architects (the other YBAs!) whose coterie at Goldsmiths College, UK is fashioning a new PhD program in spatial practice. With a preface by Hans Ulrich Obrist – the curator of the moment – the collection begins with a theoretical posturing that is difficult to sustain through such eclectic (and nebulous) topics as “professional amateurs,” “special stupidity,” “augmented reality” and “magical worlds.” Obrist advocates for a membrane-like curatorial practice: one that maintains its shape while allowing necessary other particles, nutrients and substances in to enrich its functioning. These foreign bodies are the artists, architects, engineers, educator, urbanists and musicians whose input into the life of an exhibition is, for him, becoming essential. Like a postmodern muezzin, he calls the culturati to the secular mosque of the museum not to pray, but to participate. With the book’s launch in fall of 2006, there have been several events in New York and London to keep the book’s discussions going and bring them to a live

audience – an actualization of what its writers have advocated.

Its title page declaration says: “A report from the frontlines of cultural activism looks at spatial practitioners who actively trespass into neighboring or alien fields of knowledge,” claiming currency and transgression in one aspirant phrase. While several of the articles are pure fancy and conjecture, (Witness chapter 5: “Don’t Fuck the Authorshiplessness”), there are also essays on Palestinian displacement, the semiotics of the battles in Falluja, Iraq, and a frank discussion about globalization’s side-effects on disadvantaged countries and local economies.

The other essays have the requisite sprinkling of Michel de Certeau, Zygmunt Bauman, Marshall McLuhan and Aristotle (!) that we are getting used to in ambitious architectural compendiums. But within the heavy-ply pages can also be found a series of remarkable photographs by Frank van der Salm, Bas Princen’s large format portraits of buildings and the visual journalism of Armin Linke, amidst many other images, graphs, maps and diagrams attending to delicate arguments. One particularly exotic and amusing piece is the Mumbai City Dictionary, created by Celine Condorelli and Beatrice Gibson, which, after lamenting the quality of taxi service in the Indian city, creates an unconventional guide for riders and drivers. The book’s cover features a fantastically fractured map of geopolitical divisions – every country floats by itself in a blue ocean, so putting the globe together becomes a mental jigsaw puzzle. The over-arching message appears to be that from the Himalayas to Mexico City and on all sides of the earth, space can no longer be conceived of as the domain of one discipline. Whether geographers, climatologists, artists, taxi drivers or curators, we are all creating the reality of space, something that should be celebrated and critiqued for how it really is.