

On rooftops, stretching beyond sight

Interview between Andrea Cinel and Jordi Colomer

Andrea Cinel: in *What Will Come* you present two different yet parallel projects: a trilogy of videos and a series of posters which were done in Rennes; was it the place that inspired you to do this?

Jordi Colomer: Over the last two years, in all the cities I go to, I visit rooftops, private spaces which one cannot usually access. Very privileged spots to watch the city – as a physical place. This gives rise to many questions in the history of modern architecture, but also in the use which citizens can make of the public space. So, when I was invited by the arts and crafts Master of the exhibition in Rennes, we worked for six months on a project for the exhibition. As I saw it, the project shouldn't only take place on the conventional spaces for exhibitions, but also in other places in the city, i.e. a larger space. Besides, in Rennes, buildings with terraced rooftops mark a strong contrast with traditional architecture.

AC: The name of the project is "*Crier sur les toits*" (literally "call out from rooftops" meaning "to proclaim"). Originally, this expression comes from the Middle East, where the rooftops of houses were actually large terraces, and where people would go and talk with neighbours. Is it easy to find a public space today, where people can go and engage in social exchange?

JC: The issue of rooftops, in certain vernacular architectures, is a space that traditionally exists. But there is a fairly crucial moment, as can be seen in the modern architecture of the CIAM¹, drawing inspiration from the spirit of Le Corbusier, from where modern architecture is organized following the principle of terraced rooftops: this is especially the case of the *Unité d'Habitation (Housing Unit) in Marseille (1945-1952)*, which has a theatre, a playroom for children, etc. Therefore it is an ideal place for meetings and activities to be held, but they are on the top of the buildings. Already in Le Corbusier's buildings, this idea did not work, and as of the 1960's, it proved to be useless. However we have maintained the type of construction with terraced rooftops, a space which is empty of its social purpose and has become an invisible space which cannot be accessed for purposes other than technical reasons. It would be possible however to give these spaces another use or, at least, to mark their existence.

AC: So it is an attempt to regain the public space?

JC: Exactly, it has turned into an invisible space because we can't access it, it is forgotten, but nevertheless it is still there. It is a space which resembles what Foucault called heterotopias, other spaces, places there is a possibility of action, a possibility of a localized utopia today.

AC: Where did you get the idea to organize a party on the 7th of April? I think this idea of a "party" is interesting because the Latin word *festum* means public joy, a moment of collectiveness. Is this a utopian way of yours to open up a critical space? Or rather, do you see it as a festive thing?

¹ The international congresses of modern architecture (CIAM) were created from the need to promote functional architecture and urban development. The first of these congresses, organized by Le Corbusier, Hélène de Mandrot (the owner of the castle where it was held) and Sigfried Giedion (first secretary-general) was held in Switzerland, in June 1928, bringing together 28 European architects.

JC: The idea behind this project is to create a party at a global scale, in all cities, where people would go up onto the rooftops to shout: to publicly proclaim to others something they want to communicate. I think the uniqueness of this space escapes the domains of power, since it is not a classic space to gather on in cities. And rooftops are precisely a space we can give different uses, and individually, and at the same time, to share with our own community. So it is a kind of civility living in a city. I consider there is a happy and collective part to this party, even if it is announced as an individual action. It is an individual speaking out into the void, to others in the city. But this happy part comes from the fact that we are in a place we wouldn't normally be, it is exceptional, the day of the year where, as in Carnival, we allow ourselves to do something which is prohibited the rest of the year.

AC: That's interesting, because Paul Virilio said "that we are witnessing the death of streets, the end of contact with the land, with sidewalks", which is the same as saying that power achieves its goals by promoting that everyone stays at home alone.

JC: And I would add: isolating people in individual cells.

AC: And not having a unity which could have a political implication. So, the act of going up onto a rooftop and proclaiming something publicly, not being discrete, making it known, is quite simply a political act. With this, are you trying to metaphorically talk about the fact that individuals do not have a political space of action and democratic representation?

JC: To follow the lines of what you said about Virilio, I personally consider him to be slightly catastrophist in his vision on the future, but we can state it. And yes, everyone knows there is a sort of echo of individual cells. Also, with the new technologies, we can communicate with outsiders, people who are far, with whom we can exchange messages very easily, and this is normally done from these individual cells. The idea of calling out from rooftops is about going back to a spatial experience with our body, with a voice, in a physical space in the city, which would be like a sort of translation of this relationship with others, communicating, listening and understanding. There is this awareness that the gesture is nearly a performance, so an awareness of the fact that by saying something, being in the position of something. Of seeing the small effects of space, going up onto the stage of a theatre, something that is similar to a political meeting, places that always place you higher than others, that's the kind of things I find interesting. It is literally about taking this, the highest spot, and having the possibility of taking the floor: pure actions of our body vis-à-vis a disposition in space.

AC: The project is conceived in an exhibition room, but also in the public space: it can adopt different forms and cause/guide a sliding between indoor and outdoor, and the other way round. The way is choosing the photo, a fixed and silent image. Is this choice moved by the fact that what interests you is representing action as a universal gesture?

JC: In actual fact, it isn't so much about documenting what could happen in this party, but rather about creating an invitation to this action. The posters show a variety of different people: twenty three people calling out from rooftops without mentioning the kind of message to circulate. Also, when we took the photos, it became like a private party where you have some one-hundred people; I must say there were all sorts of proclamations: on love, rage, calls for a revolution, a diversity of messages. When looking at the posters we can try imagining what may be said on a rooftop; it's up to each person to imagine what they would want to proclaim if they were in this position. Only by looking at the gestures,

we can see that each is unique, everyone adopts a different body position, each and every one is specifically individual.

AC: The usual panoramic views show touristy places. Does the background of your posters lead to look at the configuration of the city and urban planning differently?

JC: It also means giving the possibility – this is the first reaction of the people who wanted to go up onto the rooftops – of seeing things differently, physically, the space of the city, of becoming aware of the individual scale with regards this construction. Also, it is an invitation to participate with a different point of view; it's not the same to call out in the street or in a park than from a privileged position. One must also imagine that during the event a sort of network of rooftops emerged, and that a part of the city which was abandoned comes to life again.

AC: The main part of the exhibition is a trilogy of video installations shot in New York. How did you develop this project?

JC: First of all I made this project in Mexico, with the name *Avenida Ixtapaluca (houses for Mexico)*. It was about seeing how Mexico City is growing and how the second largest city in the world, after Tokyo, continues to expand. It is often said that this city has no limits, so I wanted to see the forms it is taking today and see how they are organized in spatial terms. The neighbourhood, Ixtapaluca, is a role model of what is happening in the whole of Latin America but, having said this; it is also a model that arrived from the United States, a model of residential urban planning with detached homes repeated over and over again. So, I had the idea of going on a return trip back to the original model in the United States, on the one hand, and then another part representing the crossing of the Mexico-USA border. There is a jump from the last shot in Ixtapaluca in Mexico to Bronx in New York: a neighbourhood which in a way is the same – and of which we know what it looks like from the images generated in fiction and in documentaries – and a case of what cities should not have turned into. When Bronx was at its worst moment, Co-op City was born from a public intervention which intended to be a model. It is a construction of blocks on the site of a former funfair where people were moved to this new and slightly idyllic place in order to have a different kind of organization, made up of multicultural populations. My intention was to go to this neighbourhood, nowadays, and see what it's turned into.

AC: What did this space suggest to you? Did it have a positive effect on the people?

JC: I don't think it's my task to reach conclusions on urban development. The approach I take for this kind of places is more about filming images inside these very specific places and from there take fragments of reality which tell us about our ways of living. After weeks of observation the people we saw going by the whole time, crossing this physical space, were deliverers of take-away food, because there is no real restaurants or bars in these neighbourhoods. Most of these food deliverers are Mexicans. This creates a link with Ixtapaluca; in a way it is the same character, in Bronx, that has been displaced.

AC: Inhabit and habit are two different words which have the same etymologic root, the verb to have. When you watch the video, it's shocking to see these words interfere with one another. In your work, this is where the border between fiction and reality becomes fuzzy. It all stems from observation, choosing a place is extremely important. My question is knowing how do you see this relation between these two words which represent different things?

JC: If Co-op were the scenery of a theatre and we considered a day with twenty-four hours as a theatrical piece: we would of course have the inhabitants in their individual cells, but there would also be all the people who constantly pass by this place (for eight or ten hours a day) who are also very much present. Maybe they inhabit other places, but they inhabit these places in the sense of a habit. In other words, the issue of what really establishes this link between the three videos, I think, is that these people also inhabit these places, insofar as the occupation of their life time is linked to this space. Social or political issues are not directly dealt with but they are beyond any doubt reflected through showing a body in motion. It is also about seeing to what extent they are free to intervene in a place, meaning really inhabiting it.

AC: Do you choose an everyday gesture to raise it to its universal status, while giving the freedom of interpretation to the people watching the video, to interact with the character? There is little dialogue; it's more like an expression of the body with the environment. How do you see this relation?

JC: It's about seeing, from different points of view, the relation between the body and the place, but especially it's about literally seeing how an individual is guided by this spatial organization. I took a moment to think about the film "My American Uncle" (1980) by Alain Resnais, which I have always enjoyed and which has nothing to do with it, but at the same time it does. It tells a story of fiction but with real characters; but at a given moment Resnais ends the fiction and includes scientists who analyse the behaviour of the characters vis-à-vis possible issues they may encounter. An aspect I've tried to maintain is the way of filming, from a cold view, and that is also why it was necessary to film it impeccably from a technical point of view.

AC: We are in the domains of fiction, but with a very strong documentary side to it. Do you construct a fiction so it is close to documentaries or is it the other way round?

JC: I think that all visual constructions involving images in movement is necessarily a construction, and therefore a fiction, even the purest of documentaries. In my films there is often an ambiguous approach since there is always the question of how much truth there is in what is clearly a fiction.

AC: I find it very interesting to see how each character in this trilogy is occupying the border between being an actor and an extra; is it only coincidental that there is no dialogue?

JC: We followed the movements of these characters who are actors, but who in fact are reproducing their everyday gestures. In the case of Co-op City, the same principle applies as the one used for the trilogy, we film the same action three times, but from different points of view: sometimes it is a close-up, sometimes a panoramic view where the character is portrayed as an ant regarding the whole thing. I try broadening the point of view on this presence, showing its multiplicity.

AC: In this trilogy you also film Levittown and holidays at Long Island using this same principle of displacement, of travelling in space. How do these other two places relate to Co-op City?

JC: In the trilogy, the intention was to have three individuals doing three different activities, and where the point in common would be this relation to space. In the use of time there is one aspect in Fourier's ideas which surprised me regarding the Phalanstère, and that is

the division of work. According to Fourier, each individual should change activity every two hours, which would mean doing five or six different activities during the day. It is the antithesis of the way in which work is organized today. Therefore, I tried seeing to what extent this way of organizing urban space could affect repetitive movements, both in the context of work and free time.

AC: With the specificities of space, what are the links between these three places you represent?

JC: Firstly, Levittown is an example of individual residential organization which replicated throughout the USA, and where the middle-class lives. It is the image of the USA in the 1950's, this golden age where everything went just fine, an American model that was exported throughout the whole world. Next, Montauk is a slightly generic place for holidays, with a vast beach, with pizzerias and bungalows we can find in any other holiday resort. This model was also a success, which replicated and was exported. So in summary we have, on the one hand, the uniqueness of each place allowing us to escape from the stereotypes we have of New York, but at the same time, each of these three places has a universal status while being very local.

AC: Your work is linked to the urban space; how do you relate to an exhibition room? How does a project live in an exhibition room?

JC: I consider an exhibition room as a street where things happen that I cannot control. I include elements which are part of fiction but which also have the bizarre status of being like pieces of reality filtered through fiction. The reflections made in the videos are about the city, are aiming at individuals who are sharing a space and open up to other spaces. Every time more and more, I see an exhibition room as being different from classic cinemas, and therefore I try to step away from the *blackbox* at any rate. We will be presenting these three videos in a space which is not closed, where there is freedom to move around, and where, at each moment, we decide what point of view we adopt. Another point is the posters, which will also be placed in other parts of the cities, out in the streets. I would be really happy if the visitors of the exhibition could become inhabitants of this place; this would be ideal.

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Transcription: Laurence Pen.