

Trading Indeterminacy – Informal Markets in Europe

Peter Mörtenböck & Helge Mooshammer

Informal markets generate sites of counter-globalisation based on a deterritorialisation of cultures. Many of these markets are hubs of migratory routes whose idiosyncratic complexity reflects the tension between traditional economies, black markets and the new conditions of deregulated and liberalised capital markets. The dynamics of these sites highlight the network character of the radicalised and deregulated flows of people, capital and goods worldwide. One of the effects this network phenomenon creates is an increased transnationalisation and hybridisation of cultural claims and expressions. In view of growing cultural homogenisation, this brings to the fore one of the most potent traits of informal markets: the sprawl of a myriad of indeterminate parallel worlds existing next to each other or literally within the same place. Along a set of case studies carried out by the EU funded research project, *Networked Cultures* (www.networkedcultures.org), this text looks at three different informal markets as micro-sites of paradoxical and indeterminate cultural production: Izmailovo Market Moscow, Istanbul Topkapi and Arizona Market Brčko (BaH).

A striking facet of the many contradictions produced by the global economic system is the resurgence of markets as prime sites of struggle relating to questions of governance and self-governance. Markets have turned into a stage upon which battles over existing societal order and alternative forms of organisation are smouldering. The notion 'informal market' is commonly used as an umbrella term to describe scattered phenomena of trade whose origins and spatial materialisations are of varied character, while having more or less the same political and historical context. Most often these globally distributed nodes of the informal economy are an effect of political upheaval, global economic deregulation, migratory movements and new labour situations. These days they emerge in periods of transition, between omnipotent government control and globally oriented neoliberal societies, in which the state's role is confined to optimising 'informal' arrangements. Hand in hand with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, new nodes of exchange have sprung up in previously peripheral regions of Europe. These spots have turned into transient agglomerations of thriving informal trade, bringing different cultures together along the new axes of commercial gravitation. This development accounts for an abundance of uncontrolled interactions, indeterminate spaces and eclectic imageries in different pockets of Europe. From the improvised shanties of post-war economies, such as street traders and kiosks, which provide basic supply in derelict urban areas, to the widely ramified infrastructures of Eastern Europe's shuttle trade, informal markets have become prime sites for economies of survival to impinge upon contemporary forms of spatial organisation. Driven by the new imperative of social mobility and the undertow of expanding transnational spaces, these sites have evolved into novel and extreme material configurations. Among the best known European markets of this kind are Arizona Market in the Northeast of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Izmailovo Market in Moscow, Jarmark Europa in Warsaw's Dziesięciolecie stadium and the so called 'suitcase trade' between the Balkans and the Caucasus with its Istanbul base Laleli. They contribute to a proliferation of transitory spaces in which different cultures engage in a variety of shadow plays alongside the homogenising forces of globalisation, and in doing so, have become a vital source for architects, artists and theorists to study the potential of accelerated spatial appropriation and self-organisation.

Many examples could be given. There is the work of the longstanding Lagos project by Rem Koolhaas and its intimate engagement with the city's informal economies.¹ This project probes the effects of growth in the self-regulating organism of Lagos' Alaba Market, in the spontaneously emerging links between transport and informal trade, and in the many ingenious inventions which help organise everyday life in a seemingly

¹ Rem Koolhaas, *Lagos Wide & Close: An Interactive Journey into an Exploding City*, DVD and booklet (Amsterdam: Submarine, 2005).

² Rem Koolhaas and Edgar Cleijne, *Lagos: How It Works* (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2007).

³ Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes (eds.), *The Mahgreb Connection: Movements of Life Across North Africa* (Barcelona: Actar, 2007).

⁴ Sofia Hernández et al. (eds.), *The Black Box: BMW* (Black Market Worlds), 9th Baltic Triennial Vilnius/London (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2005).

dysfunctional mega city.² Another case would be Ursula Biemann's video geographies: works that bare highly complex topological relations by portraying the tactics and disguises of smugglers in the Spanish-Moroccan border region, or by documenting the geo-strategic rivalries and representational politics around the trans-Caucasian oil pipelines and through investigating the economy of Mediterranean migration. What emerges through these works are relations which complicate the clear distinction between formality and informality, between inside and outside in dealing with material and symbolic goods.³ Using maps and diagrams of the trajectories which link global sex work, informal economies, self-organisation and migration, these relations are further explored in Tadej Pogačars project *CODE:RED*. Its support in the formation of communication networks for informal economic actors, instigates an uncontrollable space of dialogue whose geometry is both mobile and affected by the encounters between its users. This is also true of the street kitchens of Atelier d'Architecture Autogèrèe or Osservatorio Nomade which engaged a plethora of people in an unregulated space of communication and collaboration. The formation of open communications and infrastructures also plays an important role in Azra Akšamija's proposals to make Arizona Market, in the south-east European Brčko District, sustainable by means of what she calls *Provocateur Poles*: poles furnished with complex ICT infrastructure, which would be available to all market users free of charge. Or, the 9th Baltic Triennial *Black Market Worlds* (2005), which scoured the potentials of grey economies stretching between Vilnius and London: an exhibition that considered black markets less as its subject than as an organising principle for practices and systems, in which moments of social exchange are brought into being through opaque operations.⁴

This list of experimental explorations of informal economies could be extended with many more examples. Each of these projects engages singular transgressions and violations against existing spatial arrangements, and produces a set of openings in the matrix of economic inclusions and exclusions, hubs and peripheries. What is common to all these endeavours is the question of how to organise a space, which has neither centre nor specific end; a space that is neither characterised in relation to a central authority nor through programmed identities and strict objectives. What is at stake here is a complex and transient spatiality, which resists the usual analytical tools suitable for static associations and formalised institutions. A possible way of incorporating this challenge into our research strategies is to look at the dynamics emerging from the contact of formal and informal urban structures; to look at the 'impure', 'contaminated' and 'situated' networks effected by the coming together of formal and informal urban forces. How do the formal and the informal

engage with one another? What kind of cultural encounters does this constellation provoke? What leads us to believe that these encounters produce innovative spatial effects that reach beyond the immediate situation? And how can we negotiate these glimmers of hope with the more unfortunate aspects of the realities of informal markets?

Relational Spaces

Informal markets are spaces of transition in one way or another. For one thing they act as places of transient inhabitation, for another, they are themselves seen as mere 'boundary effects'; as adaptors between deregulated conditions and controlled order. The shortcoming of such thinking is that it presents transition as a linear process whose endpoint is a foregone conclusion. It also presupposes the existence of a central plan governing the slightest manipulation, as well as the presence of a regulatory scheme that has the power to cover the totality of progress. The notion of transition that we prefer in our own deliberations, is more connected to a slide into a condition as yet unknown, whose particular spatial character reveals itself slowly.⁵ This transition is a-physical in the first instance, but generates an accelerated space saturated with an abundance of conflicting signs and practices of signification. In this sense, transition characterises indeterminate sites prone to a constant reshuffling and reinvention of subjectivities, and informal markets become unsurfaced places, hidden in the matrix of territorial and ideological belongings of individuals and cultures. They form trajectories in which cultures begin to interact with the forces of globalisation beyond the assigned sites of encounter. The underbelly of the liberalised capital market performs a shadow play, whose relation to the homogenising force of globalisation, is most of all characterised by a paradoxical production of micro sites of cultural heterogeneity. Here, the cultural paradoxes of globalisation make themselves manifest conspicuously; the traditions of spatial appropriation and self-organisation of markets are intimately tangled up with the dynamics of neoliberal globalisation, in the shape of accelerated network formation, movements of capital, people and goods, transterritorial spatial production and cross-cultural experience.

Looking at these sites, we cannot condone the convenient co-optation of survival strategies of the global South by neoliberal myths that equate informality with an nebulous expression of free individuality. Mobile and transient accumulation seem to be as much a constituent mechanism of black market worlds as of efficient capital markets. Elmar Altvater and Brigitte Mahnkopf have argued a certain structural alliance

⁵ S. Boeri, 'Eclectic Atlases', in *Multiplicity* (ed.), *USE: Uncertain States of Europe* (Milan: Skira, 2003), p. 434.

behind this kind of ephemeral accumulation, describing informality as a 'shock absorber of globalisation' beyond the means of the welfare state. It ought to be located through structural changes in the interaction between global, national and local economy following the requirements of global competition.⁶ Indeed, this complex entanglement of neoliberal technologies of government and forms of self-organisation, alongside the incorporation of a market mentality into the organisation of creative processes and critical practices,⁷ has led to an unfortunate point of departure in approaching the question of how we can organise cultural experience that creates a space for expressions whose form is yet to come.

In Saskia Sassen's sceptical view, informal markets are the low-cost equivalent of global deregulation, which act first and foremost as modes of incorporation into the advanced urban economies. The only difference they make, is that at the bottom of the system all risks and costs are to be taken over by the actors themselves. Her main concern is that 'the growing inequalities in earnings and in the profit-making capabilities of different sectors in the urban economy [...] are integral conditions in the current phase of advanced capitalism (and not) conditions imported from less-developed countries via migration.'⁸ In dismissing postmodern myths of informality, Sassen strikes the same chord as Mike Davis in his reflections on the informal sector in *Planet of Slums* (2006): From hidden forms of exploitation and fanatic obsessions with quasi-magical forms of wealth appropriation (gambling, pyramid schemes, etc.) right through to the decrease of social capital effected by growing competition within the informal sector, Davis instances all the epistemological fallacies of those who follow Hernando de Soto's popular economic model of an 'invisible revolution' of informal capital.⁹ Instead of delivering on the promised upward mobility in the unprotected informal sector, through means such as micro credits for micro-entrepreneurs and land titling for urban squatters, the booming informal sector has been paralleled by increased ethno-religious separation, exploitation of the poor and sectarian violence in the 1980s. Davis' idea of a counteroffensive against neoliberal informality consists in strengthening union structures and radical political parties as well as in renewing bonds of worldwide solidarity to refuse 'Informal survivalism as the new primary mode of livelihood'.¹⁰

This wealth of arguments and all its supporting statistics, maps and diagrams seem to suggest a condemnation of informality, a rejection which rests upon well documented dynamics of poverty, exploitation and oppression. The role played by global power has been clearly positioned and seems to be far too immovable to consider the emergence of unforeseen alternative social formations. But what if we, for a moment,

⁶ E. Altvater and B. Mahnkopf, 'Die Informalisierung des urbanen Raums', in J. Becker et al. (eds.), *Learning from* - Städte von Welt, Phantasmen der Zivilgesellschaft, informelle Organisation* (Berlin: NGBK, 2003), pp. 24-25.

⁷ Karl Polanyi, 'Our Obsolete Market Mentality: Civilization must find a New Thought Pattern', *Commentary* (3) (1947): 109-117, reprinted in G. Dalton (ed.), *Primitive, Archaic and Modern Economies: Essays of Karl Polanyi* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1968).

⁸ S. Sassen, 'Why Cities Matter', in La Biennale di Venezia (eds.) *Cities, Architecture and Society I* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2006), pp. 47-48.

⁹ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 178-185.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

tried to suspend the monolithic gravity of these logics. Wouldn't we notice a whole array of shortcomings in the apparatus of global economic control, shortcomings that offer a space for social experience outside the boundaries of its exercise of power? What if beyond the boundaries begotten by the economic system we became aware of a political space of boundaries that is not fully governed by economic agency and thus offers a possibility to break up the dominance of calculative norms. An arena for all sorts of social and cultural encounters would emerge. Oblivious to what ought to be done under the rule of the capitalist economy, there are minor changes occurring locally through unexpected constellations of actors and spontaneously co-ordinated conduct. These changes may inflict a set of irregularities and interruptions both on determinate movements in space and movements of the mind. Looking away from the clichéd notions of slum culture and economic chaos, social mobility and transitional society, we hope to stir up other notions, expressions, images and experiences, which throw some light upon how local co-ordination takes place in sites of informally organised trade, and how the virtue of transformation cannot be appropriated and circulated as an analogy of belongings and goods.

In his lectures at the Collège de France (1975-76) Foucault has pointed at the circulation of power, arguing that people are never the inert target of power. While power is exercised through networks, individuals are always its relays. Power passes through individuals and can thus be seized and deflected.¹¹ These are the terms that we would borrow to abandon the usual interrogations structured by questions around the true nature of informal markets and their ultimate aims. Instead, we are interested in what they help to enable on another level. The question we direct at informal markets is not oriented at a level of intentions. It is oriented at the point where transformation takes place, effected by the coming together of informal market realities and their fields of application: the place where they temporarily settle, solidify and provide a basis for widening the field of social perception and behaviour. We are interested in how we can produce an alternative engagement with the spontaneously emerging spaces of informal market activity and its material and visual peculiarities, in order to stimulate a logic of resistance, which not only touches at the level of concrete experience but also the horizon and modalities in charge of organising these experiences.

There are several temptations that need to be shuffled aside within this engagement: an alleged specificity of trading places; a cartography of places geographically predestined for such activities; a comprehensive typology of the dynamics of networks or informal markets or a typology of places where informal trade takes place. All these temptations tend to

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 29.

re-inscribe and stabilise the indeterminate turmoil of informal markets within established categories of knowledge, instead of challenging the categories around which we have been told to conceptualise the relationship between subjectivities and places. If we refer to the local as the sphere of illicit trade, then that is because it matches the perspective from which the many transient flows, the movements of aggregation and the dispersal characteristic of informal trade are thought. And it is also the place in which visual clues, spontaneous scenes, physical mutations and inconsistencies begin to make themselves felt early on. They all play off each other in miniscule movements, and provide an indication of the self-creating flow of meaning that fashions subjects and spaces. Full of indeterminate relationalities and idiosyncratic encounters, these places are at the same time, however, to be seen in an enlarged way, as trans-local sites formed by flows of intensities, pressing ahead in a multitude of combinations.

Istanbul Topkapi: Trading among ruins

In 2005 a bustling site of high-contrast undertakings emerged in Istanbul's central district of Topkapi: the process of rapid urban transformation constituting of the strong political gestures of reconstructing the Byzantine city walls and building the tracks of a state-of-the-art low-floor tram, was suddenly faced with kilometres of informal trafficking. This spontaneous black market took place just outside the gates of the historic city, along the construction sites of the high-capacity interchange between Topkapi Edirnekapi Caddesi and the eight lane Londra Asfalti. Squeezed in between newly delivered and derelict building material, busy freeways and almost impassable heaps of crushed stone, tens of thousands of people formed an endlessly meandering and pulsating structure.

The lower end of this formation is marked by the Metro station Ulubatli, the upper end by Cevizlibag, a new stop along the ultra-modern tram line, which runs from Zeytinburnu past the Grand Bazaar (Kapali Çarşı) to the old centre of the city and across Galata bridge up to the Bosphorus. The merchandise consists of heaps of second-hand goods and clothes laid out on the bare ground blending in with new TV sets, refrigerators, computers and pieces of furniture. In stark contrast to this 'wild' and bustling accumulation, the whole place is bordered with an immaculate but deserted layout of formal green, whose ghostly abandonment is amplified by the garish colour of the artificially irrigated lawn. In 1852 Théophile Gautier wrote about this stretch along the city walls:

¹² Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), p. 231.

It is difficult to believe there is a living city behind these dead ramparts! I do not believe there exists anywhere on earth [a thing] more austere and melancholy than this road, which runs for more than three miles between ruins on the one hand and a cemetery on the other.¹²

The informal market repeats the archaic model of the city's organic emergence at the intersection of traffic routes and trading places. In the case of Topkapi, however, trade flourishes in the shadow of official urban planning, transforming the latter into a vehicle of informality. The wide spread impact arising from this informal economy is not confined to the market's own dynamics, though. It is amplified by a series of secondary services linked to it: shuttle buses, street kitchens, intermediaries, suppliers, vendors and occasional street performers. It is through this bizarre entanglement of modern transport systems, symbolic sites of national renaissance and short-lived subsistence economies, through the complexities of legal work, third economies and informal trade, that this temporary market accounts for more than just an incidental set of happenings. Certainly, the mutual permeability of formal and informal structures, the aberrant utilisations of urban space and the acceleration of spontaneous cultural eruptions, designate the emergence of new urban networks, trajectories and hierarchies.



Fig. 1. *Informal Market Istanbul Topkapi*. Photos: Peter Mörtenböck & Helge Mooshammer, 2005.

In summer 2005 the informal market in Topkapi had grown to an agitated swarm-like shape more than two kilometres long; thousands of people wandering around small piles laid on dusty sand, many of the latter barely distinguishable from disposed waste, vanishing among existing debris. What black markets like Topkapi render visible is the increasing pace with which vast networks of self-organised economies enter, inhabit and withdraw themselves from unsettled territories, without being mitigated or isolated from the politics of formally organised space. There are neither recognisable borders nor consistent frameworks on whose grounds an

¹³ Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), pp. 79-82.

exchange between systems would take place. We live, as Laclau has suggested, as bricoleurs in a world of incomplete systems, whose rules we co-produce and revise by constantly retracing them.¹³ Flagging down a mini-bus at Topkapi market, we don't know if it will pull up, until we have actually boarded.

Parallel economies: Izmailovo Market Moscow

Izmailovo is the largest open market in Europe, its foot print three times larger than the Moscow Kremlin. More than 100,000 workers, traders and buyers frequent the location on a busy weekend. The former site of the historic Izmailovo village and the Royal Estate, 15 kilometres east of the Kremlin, Izmailovo served as one of the main venues to host the XXII Olympic Games in 1980. The Olympic event facilitated the regeneration of the 1930s 'Stalinets' stadium at Izmailovo, the construction of a new all-purpose sports hall for the weightlifting tournaments and, on the southern fringes of today's market area close to the metro station Partisanskaya, the biggest hotel complex built for the Olympics to accommodate some 10,000 visitors and participants.

As public investment in the sports facilities decreased after the Olympic Games, owing to the worsening financial situation of the Soviet Union especially after the demise of the USSR, traders began to move into the vacated parts of the complex and to use ever expanding sectors of the adjacent outdoor area. In 1989 a private company took charge of the stadium and, while keeping the football pitch intact, developed it into a curious mix of historico-cultural venues and sports and health facilities, equipped with massage and beauty parlours, a shooting gallery, an underground concert hall, a war time museum, restaurants and other recreational facilities open to the general public. Assisted by the rapidly sprawling Eurasian market, the former sports complex has been transformed into a fathomless labyrinth of improvised stands, containers, warehouses and open market areas. The stadium and its new amenities are completely engulfed and dwarfed by thousands of small retail spaces of what is one of the largest European hubs for goods, capital and humans. Over more than 80 hectares of retail area, Moscow's Izmailovo market, and its Cherkoizovsky Rynok in particular, are one of the most important nodes in the transnational suitcase trade between Eastern Europe, China, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, the Caucasus region and Turkey. Traders travel long distances in crowded overnight buses or lorries to buy large amounts of goods, which they sell on at domestic markets.

One of the ironies of Izmailovo is that its sprawling main part is itself masked by a quixotic *mise-en-scène*: a maze of wooden turrets and walkways, the souvenir market *Vernisazh* is a popular tourist attraction in Moscow. It is located towards the southern tip of the market, shielded off from the hustle and bustle of the adjoining subsistence economies, through a mock wooden fortress, which provides the backdrop to a bewildering array of matrioshka stalls, Soviet memorabilia, Russian handicraft, Central Asian rugs, antique busts, Georgian shashliki, street performers, and bear shows. Considered to be the world's largest exhibition-fair, *Vernisazh* houses a leisure centre named 'The Russian Court', which boasts the reconstructed Palace of Tzar Alexander and is expected to become part of a new ambitious project to set up a large-scale Trade Centre in the heart of Izmailovo.



Fig. 2. *Izmailovo Market Moscow*. Photos: Peter Mörtenböck & Helge Mooshammer, 2006.

While nested dolls may be *Vernisazh*'s best selling item, the market moulds itself into a gigantic urban matrioshka, a figure of countless parallel economies nested into each other without visible contact points. Izmailovo is a place of extreme geopolitical entanglement, while the touristy *Vernisazh* points out the illusory expectations generated by the Western market, these expectations find their match next door in the informal economies of Eastern transitory societies. The entire market is made up of a plenitude of parallel worlds, zones of Soviet planning interspersed with zones of wild capitalism and numerous deregulated zones of cultural co-existence, whose presence is hardly known to an outside world. As is the case with the cultural renaissance of the 15,000 Caucasian Mountain Jews in Moscow, whose central synagogue is a carpeted room measuring thirty-feet-by-eight-feet under the stands of the multi-faceted Izmailovo stadium.

Arizona Market: Inter-ethnic collaboration in Brčko/BaH

Arizona Market, one of the best known open markets in the Balkans, is based in the district of Brčko, a separate entity at the intersection of the Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian territories. 2,500 stalls and shops sprawling over 25 hectares of land, 3 million visitors per year and some 20,000 people employed, together make up the market. For some, it is a model for all multi-ethnic communities in the region, for others the largest open air shopping mall in southeast Europe. And for others still it is hell on earth. The difference in perspective rests upon the numerous stages and transformations of what is commonly called Arizona Market.

Initially, Arizona emerged as a black market at a US military checkpoint, along the main road connecting Sarajevo and eastern Croatia, via Tuzla and Orašje in post-Dayton Bosnia. The informal trade was fostered by the international SFOR troops as a way of encouraging inter-ethnic collaboration and economic growth. As the shanty of mobile stands, livestock, produce stalls, CD shops, motels and night clubs flourished and grew into a bustling site of commercial activities, the area also saw the arrival of unauthorised dwellings ranging from improvised shelter to single-family houses. The illicit building structures were set to be the harbingers of a self-organised urbanisation process. At the same time, Arizona increasingly attracted human trafficking and the trade in drugs and weapons. When the Brčko District came into existence in 2000, political decisions were made to confer legal status on the market, to formalise it and to collect revenues from the commercial establishments. After years of heavy struggle against the proposed master plan, large parts of the initial structures were cleared, bars and brothels were shut down, and a vast private shopping mall erected on the adjacent piece of land.



Fig. 3. Arizona Market, Brčko District (BaH). Photos: Peter Mörtenböck & Helge Mooshammer, 2006.

This further period of transformation, between the years 2002 and 2007, highlights the complexities and limits of converting the informal structure of a black market into formal businesses. The protest of resident traders had little effect on the development of the privately managed shopping centre, a joint venture between Brčko District and the Italian consortium Ital Project. An estimated 120 Million Euros will be invested to build 100,000 square metres of retail area, storage and warehouses, restaurants, entertainment facilities and even residential units. Once at its peak, the 'economic and merchants centre for southeast Europe' will include multiplex cinemas, hotels, casinos and a conference centre. More than 100 Chinese businesses will be housed in a separate mall billed as 'Trade City of China'. 15 Million Euros in taxes and fees annually contribute in turn to what is now one of the richest districts in this region.¹⁴

¹⁴ B. R. Scott and E. Murphy 'Brčko and the Arizona Market', Harvard Business School, Case 905-411 (2005).

In architectural terms, Arizona Market comprises two different areas, one predominantly occupied by commercial premises, and another boasting an idiosyncratic hybrid character: two storeys of sales floors are supplemented with a third storey, which resembles the typical features of contemporary residential estates. Flower arrangements, garden furniture, awnings, loft conversions, balustrades and miniature turrets of different style and colour produce a scene of patched domesticity, some seven metres above industrialised retail space. The improvised individual fit-out of the corporate master structure exposes the self-regulated hierarchies of these trading networks, the bizarre mix and structure of this development echoing the struggle between official planning and the dynamics of informal economies. In this small segment of Arizona Market, the clash of the two systems has led to a paradoxical co-existence of contradictory cultural claims and practices. Bringing into existence a whole set of eclectic and contradictory aesthetic expressions, the parallel worlds of Arizona Market materialise the tension between formal and informal spatial organisation. They make manifest the relationship of determinate and indeterminate forces and create an antithesis to the fixity of the master plan. This ground-level cultural and economic contestation facilitates a strange aesthetics of spatial use, which Srdjan Jovanović Weiss has termed 'Turbo Architecture': 'Turbo Architecture is an unconcealable, unrestrainable effect of the black market. Turbo Architecture is proof that architectural production depends neither on a stable market nor on a stable political system.'¹⁵

¹⁵ S. J. Weiss 'What Was Turbo Architecture?', in Weiss (ed.), *Almost Architecture*, edition kuda.nao (Stuttgart: merz&solitude, 2006), p. 28.

The ‘informal market test’

The production of architecture may not depend on a stable market, but the market does depend on architectural production within the structures of civil society. As Foucault has noted in his writings on *homo oeconomicus*, there are several preconditions for the functioning of markets, including relations of mutual trust, expedient spatial production and a proper socio-institutional layout. The question is always just how much market we can afford within the matrix of civil society.¹⁶ Along the fringes of this matrix, informal markets behave as a mobile stage on which civil society and its relation to territorial, political and global power is questioned and negotiated through temporary arrangements and an unmediated collision of worlds. This is showcased in the attempted nation building around the now disappeared informal market in Topkapi Istanbul, in the initiation of a regional economy in Brčko District and in the abstruse revitalisation of a former Olympic site in Moscow. These three markets vary significantly in how they deploy structures of indeterminacy, but they are all recognised as urban catalysts in the making of cultural co-existence: Moscow’s Izmailovo Market is a complex assemblage of layers held together through formal and informal segments of economic activities, Arizona Market could be seen as the transformation of a black market into a strategically formalised economic hub in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Istanbul’s Topkapi market simply disappeared after the modern transport infrastructure had been completed and the market site cleared. In close vicinity to strategic elements of urban planning, military and transport infrastructure, sports facilities and tourist attractions, these markets all employ creative structures based on principles of nonlinear interaction between many different people and produce effects that were neither planned nor intended.

Given their proximity to the transformation of large-scale urban infrastructures, what can be the role of these markets in terms of subject formation? In his essay ‘Actor Network Theory – The Market Test’ (a term obviously borrowed from Foucault’s analysis of political economy), Michel Callon has argued that market transactions depend on continuous processes of decontextualisation and dissociation of sellable things from other objects or human beings. Actor Network Theory pictures a market world in which the (transient) disentanglement of objects from producers, former users or contexts enables buyers and sellers to achieve a market situation where both ends of the transaction are quits once the deal is done.¹⁷ This suggests a view of the market in which framing dissociates individual agents from one another and allows for the definition of objects,

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au collège de France 1978-1979* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil/Gallimard, 2004).

¹⁷ M. Callon ‘Actor-Network Theory: The Market Test’, in ed. by J. Law and J. Hassard (eds.), *Actor Network Theory and After* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 181–195.

spaces, goods and merchandise which are perfectly identifiable. As one withdraws from old relations, transformation takes place through turning associated goods into commodities. As the dynamics of *informal* markets demonstrate, however, the terms of transformation that pertain to these sites have much more to do with structures of prolonged entanglement; it is not *despite* but *because* of this entanglement that such assemblages transform themselves into something new. They reshape themselves into amphibian structures, meaning that rather than disentangling themselves, they multiply. This mechanism has less to do with a dissociation of market transactions from other cultural contexts than with a multiplication of entanglements on various levels. And this is precisely the structure through which information passes between informal market structures and the political subjectivities emerging from these complex sites. The subject as a boundary process, a deformable and deforming agentic composite, a resilient force that defies determinateness in trading objects as much as in trading itself.

There is a lively entanglement of actors evoked by the processes which stimulate the self-organisation of informal markets and guide their transactions. It is because of family ties, the prospect of a brisk sale or the chance to sell items on at other markets, because of friendships, dependencies, liabilities or debts to suppliers, because of unexpected twists in one's life or in the light of newly emerging relations, that people come together in an environment where they can benefit from other worlds. It is not the constitution of leakage points – points where overflowing is allowed to occur and the commodification of things is partially suspended – but a much more generous and inconspicuous opening up of many different worlds onto each other that generates the exuberant dynamics and maximises the turnover of the informal market.

Drawing on analyses by the Swiss sociologists Urs Bruegger and Karin Knorr Cetina, Brian Holmes has pointed out how markets can be described as knowledge constructs. They act as epistemic objects within a sphere of technological and institutional frames. They are highly unstable and variable in their nature as they always remain incomplete and changing. This variability makes them seem alive and unpredictable.¹⁸ Informality adds another epistemic dimension to markets: as much as they can be conceptualised as knowledge constructs, they also act as a knowledge *filter*, allowing only parts of the goings-on of the market to become intelligible, while certain seccies, dubious relations and equivocal transactions are to remain unframed. It is particularly these sites of knowledge and interest, the deferral, obfuscation and active fragmentation of archival composition, which accounts for much of the activities that define informal

¹⁸ B. Holmes 'The Artistic Device. Or, the articulation of collective speech', Université Tangente (2006); <http://ut.yt.to.or.at/site/index.html>.

trade as well as accounting for the spatial emergence, dispersal and re-aggregation of informal markets. Perhaps, this is the model of fertile undercodings and misapprehensions which emerges in the trajectories of informal markets: the lack of price tags, the false trade descriptions, the improvised trading places, the mutability of constellations, the devalued spaces filled with cultural hybridities, the abundance of strange objects that can be used for almost anything. They allow us to consider the potential of cultural encounters outside the formal market prerequisites of transparency, clear calculation and disentanglement. A cacophony of sounds, voices and accents making themselves heard publicly, prior to any neatly designed arrangement for ideal speech situations. Scattered informal arrangements of stalls, trailers, trucks and tent cities that don't lead to what architects, politicians and planners might consider a rich form of cultural co-habitation but to a place elsewhere. Irregularities that characterise the 'mosaic universe' of diasporic movements where things and beings don't converge on a totality, but assert their mutual relatedness through, 'inventing junctions and disjunctions that construct combinations which are always singular, contingent and not totalising.'¹⁹ Arguably, the organising principles of informal markets may not be ideal blueprints for sustainable alternative economies, open community projects and new bonds of worldwide solidarity. They may, however, destabilise processes occurring within larger institutional and non-institutional ecologies that have been taken for granted for quite some time. From spatial organisation based around calculative agents and thoughtful planning to transient alliances, spatial meshworks and assemblages of autonomous social agents, the shift in organisation is familiar.

Informal economies thrive on top of formalised ones. This is not to suggest trajectories which capitalise on the principle of discontinuation. The prolific networks of informal trade rather adhere to a form of amalgamation, which relies on practices of sustained contradiction. An experimental theatre of civil society, it highlights the open-ended outcome of operations that emerge from places of transition.

¹⁹ M. Lazzarato 'To See and Be Seen: A Micropolitics of the Image', in A. Franke (ed.), *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond* (Barcelona: Actar, 2006), p. 296.