

INTRUSION

Alexis Dahan

You can only experience an intrusion once it has already happened. The intruder, necessarily, comes from somewhere else and does not belong to his new surroundings. From his point of view, everything is new and an alternative presents itself: standing out or blending in. On the other hand, the environment that is intruded can either accept or reject this new element. In the understanding of intrusion resides the meaning of newness because, by essence, what is new is different; it does not belong and cannot be imagined nor understood until its intrusion has been dealt with.

SEPT 10TH - NOV 7TH, 2015

INTRUSION

DEFINITION

“The intruder enters by force, through surprise or ruse, in any case without the right and without having first been admitted. There must be something of the intruder in the stranger; otherwise, the stranger would lose its strangeness: if he already has the right to enter and remain, if he is awaited and received without any part of him being unexpected or unwelcome, he is no longer the intruder, nor is he any longer the stranger. It is thus neither logically acceptable, nor ethically admissible, to exclude all intrusion in the coming of the stranger, the foreign.

Once he has arrived, if he remains foreign, and for as long as he does so — rather than simply “becoming naturalized”— his coming will not cease; nor will it cease being in some respect an intrusion: that is to say, being without right, familiarity, accustomedness, or habit, the stranger’s coming will not cease being a disturbance and perturbation of intimacy.

This matter is therefore what requires thought and, consequently, practice — otherwise the strangeness of the stranger is absorbed before he has crossed the threshold, and strangeness is no longer at stake. Receiving the stranger must then also necessarily entail experiencing his intrusion. Most often, one does not wish to admit this: the theme of the intruder, in itself, intrudes on our moral correctness (and is even a remarkable example of the politically correct). Hence the theme of the intruder is inextricable from the truth of the stranger. Since moral correctness assumes that one receives the stranger by effacing his strangeness at the threshold, it would thus never have us receive him. But the stranger insists, and breaks in. This is what is not easy to receive, nor, perhaps, to conceive...”

Jean Luc Nancy
L’Intrus, 2000



STANDING OUT

The above phenomenological analysis of the “intrusion” comes from the experience of the author’s heart transplant,

but this excerpt is nonetheless appropriate to define every different kind of intrusion.

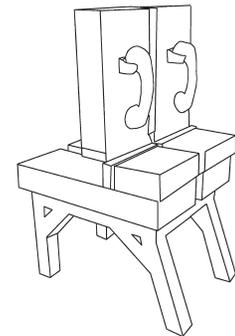
I have always considered the public space as a privileged location to create my artistic interventions. There are stakes because we share it with everybody else. But the streets are all about functionality and art is not. Imagine a blue water puddle in the middle of the street. It is absolutely useless.

The fragility of its existence is inversely proportional to its conspicuous way of occupying the space on the surface of the street. It is fragile but also has the power to modify our perception of the city by introducing visual content that does not belong to this type of urban landscape. By breaking this context, it becomes an intruder but as underlined by Jean Luc Nancy, the strangeness of the stranger can be absorbed. Indeed the rising commonality of public art being what it is, such presence is accepted; we could even say that it is expected. The art environment somewhat gives it an inoffensive dull artistic meaning, a little bit like second hand smoke. Once identified as “public art”, the public artwork

loses the power to subvert its surroundings. When the question “what is it?” gets dumbly answered by “it’s just art” all artistic value immediately disappears.

Public art interventions also float between their potential to raise questions as artworks and their total intellectual worthlessness when labelled as such. The intruder that stands out is always located in-between, not a complete stranger nor a part of the family.

Welcoming the other inside the family could be a way of understanding the action of transforming urban furnitures into interior furnitures. A Payphone Chair still stands out, but you can sit on it.



WHY PUBLIC ART?

“During the last six years, I have made about twenty different interventions in the public space, in cities, in (non-artistic) public areas, and in nature. What I wanted was to blend my work, expose my work, put my work at risk, put it in danger, abandon it, understate it, put it into circulation, put it to test while remaining its owner. I am the one who decides where my work goes. I do not consider these interventions as actions; and even though other people may be involved, people’s reactions have never interested me. I am not hunting for scandals, stories or encounters. What interests me is the context in which my work is located and how I can place my work in the most diverse contexts possible, though without any sociological, ethnological or political intentions. I am interested in what is public, I am interested in the world; and therefore, I need to go back to this kind of necessity. Because I think that if I make something necessary for me, others may perceive it as such and thus accept it. However, I cannot be the executioner of someone else’s necessity. (...)

The works itself, the interventions, are not necessarily announced publically, especially if they are ephemeral, precarious and limited in time. It is an essential element on which I have reflected concerning interventions in the public space. Nothing that lasts. Nothing lasts. Only traces. And indeed I think this type of work can very well remain as a trace. There are mediums for this such as photography, video, or print. It is possible to make a book, a journal; it is possible to create a video; it is possible to show traces to a wider audience. Adding monuments must be avoided, no matter how small. What could be attempted, however, is to keep traces, to keep the memory awakened, trying to accept the precariousness of all man-made things as opposed to nature.”

Thomas Hirschhorn
excerpts from “Letter to Guy”
1995



NEW YORK SETT

Starting in the 17th century, cobblestones (cobbling refers to the shaping of the stones) began to replace the city’s oyster shell and

dirt streets. Round stones were used until the introduction of flat oblong granite, known as Belgian block, which was brought in as ship ballast.

New York grew rapidly, with cobblestones becoming the bumpy and echoing surface of the busiest thoroughfares. According to Kathleen Hulser, public historian at the New-York Historical Society, in June 1789, when New York was still the country’s capital, George Washington was ill and his wife, Martha, ordered that a metal chain be extended across Cherry Street to prevent the metallic clickety-clack reverberation of horse hooves and carriage wheels on the cobblestone in front of the presidential mansion.



COBBLESTONE STREETS IN
NEW YORK TODAY

In the mid-to-late 19th century, cobblestones began to be phased out as a primary material, in favor of less expensive concrete. Much of the city’s old surface has been dismantled, or paved over.

Restoring New York Streets
Niko Koppel,
NEW YORK TIMES 2010

PARIS AND NEW YORK

“More than in any other city seen, Paris resembles New York in the great amount of rebuilding and street excavation going on. (...)

With the exception of London, Paris is the only great city visited whose traffic in any degree either equalled or exceeded that of New York in quantity” (...)

“The belgian block is the most frequently used block at the present time in the cities of Central Europe.”

*Street Paving and Maintenance
in European Cities*
The City of New York, 1913

Note:

According to public records, Crosby street was repaved on June 28th 1935 with Granite 5in deep.

BLENDING IN

One February morning I took the decision to extract a Belgian Block from Soho (with the violence of a dentist), take it with me to Paris, find one of a similar size and shape to replace it with the New York cobblestone, then bring the Parisian cube back to America to place it at the corner of Crosby and Prince Street where the New York cube came from. Why? I am not sure I have a satisfying answer. The idea arose inside me and stayed for a while until I carried it out, maybe until I freed myself from it. There are many aspects of that intervention that interest me deeply and as an artist I believe that available knowledge must motivate and inform my work. This knowledge may be historical, philosophical, sociological or artistic.

Ideas too can intrude. New ideas represent the establishment's oldest nightmare because their very newness presupposes that what is already there could be outdated. Their otherness questions the validity of the system in which they don't belong. But new ideas do not stand a chance out in the open. If they are indeed worth being spread, they have to blend

in and avoid any attention. Maybe then the right word becomes infiltration. It is still an intrusion, though a quiet one. Undercover. You do not go and tell a monarch that power should be divided through various democratically elected representatives. You tell that to the people you trust, when the night has come, all gathered underground, while blending-in like everyone else during the day. You can understand the idea of the narrative I am referring to, but what does that have to do with tiny quiet cobblestones?

The cobblestones have had politically loaded meaning because they are part of Parisian both mythological and historical revolutionary past (although they were also used for the same purpose in every European cities where uprising happened throughout history) "Paris is only Paris when digging up its cobblestone" wrote Louis Aragon in 1942. Forty years later, Julien Gracq understands the myth is over: "There was the myth of Paris, a myth that survived through the years but has recently broke apart. The myth was born in 1789, but especially during the events of 1830... under the form of political bellicosity, the cliché Paris-is-the-light-of-revolutions;

the myth of the cobblestone, the burning hot cobblestones of Paris, always ready to rise as barricades, the explosive symbol of the city's dynamic. Paris Commune made it last longer under the Third Republic and finally as a late parody: the barricades of 1968." It fascinates me that the very material in which the street system was made could be used specifically to elevate a barricade that would make a street impassable. The floor that allows for fast displacement can become a wall that forbids all displacement: from horizontality to verticality.

You may go to rue Jean de Beauvais in Paris or to Crosby Street in New York and look down your feet, but you will not be likely to find where the switch happened. This intrusion is invisible, and the only way to experience it is through the traces I recorded and gathered as documentation.



RESISTANCE

When all slides, when all is fine, with no obstacles, when you are happy about your corner while being in your corner, you do not need to think, you do not need to ask questions, and you just stay

there. I believe that new thoughts, new ideas, whether Philosophical or artistic, only grow out of friction: "the resistance that one surface or object encounters when moving over another," according to the dictionary. Newness cannot be identified as such because we have literally no idea of what newness looks like, otherwise it would not be new. Newness intrudes like ivy grows; it finds resistance on the surface where it anchors its branches. It is an intruder; and because of that, we have to welcome it as such.

CREDITS

I would like to thank Bethanie Brady and Ali Cashman from FIVE ELEVEN without whom there would be no exhibition; Sarah Lehat for spreading the word; and Ron Beach with his RND Studios crew for showing me how.

TALK

Art historian Ann Fensterstock (*Art on the Block*) and curator Manon Slome (*No Longer Empty*) will be talking with me about this **Monday, September 21st 7pm at 511 west 27th street.**

