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The Threshold of the City

The phenomenon of the city has fascinated not only architects and urban planners, but also philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and artists who, carefully examining its structure, regard its transformations as a reflection of considerable changes in the human condition. This issue has become particularly intriguing since modernity, when the city turned into a gigantically vibrant metropolis that tied together in a concentrated whole the most crucial aspects of its inhabitants' existence. The classic figure associated with the city is the *flâneur,* a stroller, sauntering and observing the spectacle of the metropolis. According to Walter Benjamin, he experiences the urban landscape as a labyrinth: "The city is the realization of the humanist ancient dream of the labyrinth. Without knowing it, *flâneur* goes in search of this reality."[1] The German philosopher suggests that the city only appears to be coherent, whereas, despite its material presence embodied by architecture, it remains elusive and inscrutable. Meanwhile, for the postmodern city described as a post-*polis*, the key figure remains the other,[2] moving in the complicated and dynamic space of the contemporary metropolis. These dynamics, in cities such as Las Vegas, lead so far that the virtual becomes real, and the real becomes virtual,[3] blurring the distinction between actuality and appearance, and, in consequence, transferring the existence of such a hybrid in the sphere *between* reality and virtuality.

The next step is made when the city functions only in virtuality and comes into existence in cyber-space, without any real architectural tissue on the surface of the earth. And this is exactly the case with *Alien City*—the virtual city "floating" in cyberspace at http://alien.mur.at/aliencity/index.php. "The problem of virtuality means that the work of art is immaterial and needs an interface to be experienced. It exists as a code on a server and manifests itself visually and sometimes aurally. To receive it properly, it has to be mediated by means of a computer connected to the Internet."[4]

The phenomenologists prefer experiencing the city and perceiving its structure by means of bodily immersion in the network of streets, physical being among the buildings and moving along routes they take. "Cities observed from a high altitude, as a result of this particular perspective, are naturally similar. To experience the specificity of an actual urban space, one needs to immerse oneself in its tissue, walking the streets, looking at facades."[5] One should literally cross the threshold of the city, penetrate it, experience its sounds, odours, the atmosphere, the hardness of the pavement under one's feet. In his ruminations on

1   Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA, 1999, 429–430 (unless noted as above, English translations of quotations are by the translator of the text from Polish).
2   Ewa Rewers, Post-*polis. Wstęp do filozofii ponowoczesnego miasta*, Kraków 2005, 6.
3   Ibid., 137.
4   Ewa Wójtowicz, *net art*, Kraków, 2008, 111.
5   Jadwiga Zimpel, "Od reprezentacji do symulacji—migoczące powierzchnie," *Nowoczesność po ponowoczesnośći*, ed. Grzegorz Dziamski, Ewa Rewers, Poznań, 2007, 240.

Prague Jacques Derrida asks: "What is the threshold for the city?"[6] The question gets complicated even more when, because of its virtuality, the city cannot be experienced with one's own body, as in the case of *Alien City*. The French philosopher notices that "sometimes the city is exactly on the threshold, not only in the figure of the threshold but at the threshold of a new figure, a still invisible configuration that the city has to achieve for itself not to be submitted to the laws of something else."[7] Despite the fact that this statement is made in the context of a reflection on Prague, it seems potentially appropriate in relation to *Alien City*, which gains for itself new space and still invisible configuration and, on new terms, to exist only in cyberspace. "The website address becomes the threshold of the city, the immersion of the body in the virtual space of the city can be the nearest (but still to come) future in which, even from Icarus' perspective, one is incapable of drawing a line dividing the city from non-city. What remains is the perspective of computer screens and windows, which still constitute a pass to a 'better world'."[8]

A Better World

Searching for a better world in the context of the city has its long tradition, which becomes manifest in the attempts to design so-called ideal, perfectly laid out cities that were supposed to provide its residents with happiness and well-being. The heyday of such ideas was the Renaissance, and the first example of such a city was Sforzinda, the plan of which was an octagonal star, fully harmonious and symmetrical, drawn up for the Sforza family of Milan by a Florentine named Filarete in the mid 15th century. In spite of the fact that Sforzinda was never built, a similar idea was taken up in late 16th century by Scamozzi. He was commissioned by the Venetians to build Palmanova in Udine province, the plan of which resembled a star or a snowflake. By all means the most interesting project in this context is another never realized design of an ideal city by Leonardo da Vinci, who, bringing up the issue of functionality, thought over even such details as the width of the streets in relation to the height of the adjacent palaces. To make transportation convenient and keep the city hygienic he set the city up on a river. The most radical and futuristic element seems to be the multilevel structure he proposed to facilitate the functioning of traffic arteries, the transportation of goods and the connection with navigable canals. The ideal city was a peculiar microcosm, a better world which was sometimes supposed to implement utopian ideas: its tissue was to contain all the necessary offices, cult places, residences and even brothels. The majority of such projects remained virtual, never materialized, even though Filarete's and Leonardo's ideas inspired the construction of many real cities.

In the light of this tradition, *Alien City* can also be regarded as an ideal city. Created in cyberspace, with the Internet address as its threshold, it is an agglomeration relating to utopian principles, often impossible to realize in actual reality and located online as postulates issued by the authorities of the metropolis. These propositions touch upon the issue of remodeling society by creating new ways of life, based on liberalization and the abolition of all stable coordinates, foundations and boundaries. Hence, inasmuch the neat layouts of the ideal Renaissance cities were based on harmony, symmetry, order and stillness of both architectural forms and social order, *Alien City* is a city-as-process, characterized by incessant changeability, fluidity and elusiveness.

6   Jacques Derrida, *Pokolenia jednego miasta*, in: "Lettre Internationale" winter 1993/1994, 13, quoted in: Ewa Rewers, op.cit., 63.
7   Ibid., 13.
8   Ewa Rewers, op.cit., 69.

Alien City—The City as a Monad

Alien City consists of superimposed images of various real cities in the world and futuristic, computer-generated views. Visual aspects are complemented by sounds recorded in the streets of different big cities or created by means of modern technologies. It is, then, a hybrid metropolis, multilayered and coming into existence as a result of the accumulation of elements from both actual reality and these artificially created. It keeps on changing; it has neither a stable layout, nor fixed topography. It is so because each click on its map online changes its configuration, irreversibly reorganizing the layout of streets and institutions. Similarly, its borders, instead of circumscribing the agglomeration with a permanent wall, move and remain elusive. *Alien City* constantly vibrates, trembles, pulsates with transformation; although it gets transformed internally, paradoxically, it still remains itself. This set of features characterized in such a way opens up a possibility of comparison of such a dynamic structure with a notion of a monad, proposed by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who employed it in his philosophy of the structure of the world. "The same town looked at from different angles appears completely different, and is, as it were, multiplied *perspectively*. In the same way, it emerges that, because of the infinite number of simple substances, there seem to be as many different universes as there are substances. However, these are only different perspectives on a single universe, according to the different *points of view* of each monad."[9] A monad's characteristic is its ability to transform internally, within its limits, and these changes correlate with transformations of other monads, which, as if reflected in one another, contribute to the modification of the whole structure. Comparing monads to a city, Leibniz opened a way to reverse this relation and compare *Alien City* to a monad, which, in turn, makes it possible to discern the features constitutive of this agglomeration, which hovers in cyberspace and remains in a constant process. In philosophy monads are defined as spiritual beings, devoid of temporal and spatial character, which, ideally, correspond with one of the main literary inspirations for the creation of *Alien City*: *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino, in which the Italian writer depicts metropolises, temporally and spatially discontinuous, appearing to be the sum of numerous cities of the world.

Alien City—The Delocalized and Nomadic City

Alien City belongs to cyberspace which, as "virtual reality existing on the other side of a computer screen and offering an alternative being of conventional modality of human experience, without doubt, represents a new, radically different stage in the history of humanity."[10] It cancels the limitations existing in the real world and liberates it from the ballast of materiality—the city floats in limitless space, devoid of the weight of real architecture, permanent locations and physical inhabitants. As Paul Virilio noticed, "art can be 'nowhere', existing only in the emission and reception of signs" and contemporary artists are "people working precisely with the fact that art no longer takes place, that it has become pure."[11] These remarks seem to accurately characterize the situation of *Alien City* functioning as a delocalized or dislocated city, while its threshold is not material, but constituted by the website address. The location of this virtual metropolis in cyberspace coincides with another of Virilio's claims that "installations now, they are

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9   Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Monadology*, translation George MacDonald Ross, 1999, http://www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/hmp/texts/modern/leibniz/monadology/monadology.html#m57 (accessed December 10, 2011).
10 Agnieszka Myszala, "Cyberspace: Cyberprzestrze?," *Magazyn Sztuki* 17, 1998.
11 *Ślepe pole sztuki*. Paul Virilio in conversation with Catherine David, *Magazyn Sztuki* 15, 1997. Translation after: John Armitage (ed.), *Virilio Live: Selected Interviews*, London 2001, 134.

dislocating themselves, delocalizing themselves. They are efforts to break through, to lose place, to be nowhere."[12] An analogical thesis is put forth by Pierre Lévy, in whose opinion a virtual unit is de-territorialized and therefore can appear in an infinite number of moments and places, without material and permanent localization."[13] Thus, insofar as the Renaissance ideal cities, correlating with the worldview of the epoch, were characterized by symmetry, centralization and location in a carefully selected and specified area, *Alien City*—monadic, elusive, decentralized and immaterial—is in tune with the spirit of modernity and its fluidity.

So it happens sometimes that *Alien City* crosses this threshold and materializes itself in the form of video and lands in various galleries all over the world. Taking the trip towards reality, the virtual metropolis always manifests itself under different circumstances and, affected by them, undergoes constant transformation. Its essence is inscribed with the impossibility of freezing still or settling down permanently in one exhibiting institution. Before each landing in real space, *Alien City* sends more and more intense signals, something like a final countdown, signaling the choice of a place and the fact it is gradually approaching it. The phenomenon of moving around and a kind of nomadism of *Alien City* also consists in the fact that its image changes in relation to the version shown at a previous gallery. It is so because the wandering hybrid sucks in the images of streets, buildings, and silhouettes of its residents and the sound of the cities that host it, taking these fragments on a further journey. Thereby the permanence of a work of art and the stability of its structure is put into question. Despite the fact that it "absorbs" fragments of specifically localized urban organisms, due to their transformation and travelling in cyberspace, a metropolis conceived of this way is the quintessence of dislocation, regarded by Virilio as a sign of the present epoch.

The inspiration for this kind of thinking about the city was found by the group alien productions not only in the contemporary iconosphere, but also in a Frederick Kiesler text *The City in Space,* written as early as 1925. Therein the Austrian artist proposed a metropolis freely floating in decentralized space, devoid of walls, which, in his view, personified armors for bodies and souls and constrained people in their coffin-like houses. Everyday life activities were supposed to be mechanized and the divisions between the city and countryside definitively erased. Thus, the city imagined by Kiesler is a kind of an outpost of *Alien City*, its announcement or premonition.

The History of Alien City

"Histories of cities produce a network of events taking place in time and space, intertwined with other networks linking minor episodes and simple narrations in a dense tissue of a historical narrative."[14] These (hi)stories develop and in time evolve, get verified or complemented to come as close as possible to the so-called historical truth. In the case of *Alien City* things look a little different, though. Each entering the website is understood as the *stroller's* or the *other's* crossing the threshold of the city, which alters not only the topography of the agglomeration but also its history. Hence, history is not given,[15] fixed and once and for all systematized, but changeable, indefinite and, in fact, unpredictable. It depends on the movement of visitors to the virtual city. Under such circumstances it becomes unpredictable and can

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12 Ibid., 135.
13 Quoted in: Ewa Wójtowicz, op.cit., 108.
14 Ewa Rewers, op. cit., 80.
15 Marina Grzinic, Günther Heeg and Veronika Darian (ed.), *Mind the Map! History Is Not Given. A Critical Anthology Based on the Symposium*, Frankfurt/M, 2006.

develop in various directions, unexpectedly changing its course. The chronicle of the city will never take the shape of a book in which its history would be written down in chronological order; the virtual specificity of *Alien City*, drifting in cyberspace, calls into question cause-and-effect sequences and chronological axes, tangling and complicating the structure of events. In selected places one can hear different languages, a whole spectrum of sounds, and, after each click, the river and all buildings change their position. Each visit offers a different tissue of the organism and obviously such organisms, constantly in process, cannot have any definite history. As a result, memory and topographic orientation turn out to be completely useless. If a cyberspace stroller tried to find the paths he used to follow, s/he can be easily confused and mislead. In the context of *Alien City* Heraclitus of Ephesus's words that one cannot step twice into the same river become especially relevant, and classical knowledge and habits become a useless burden. The potential resident of *Alien City*, as well as someone entering it on the Internet, has to get rid of old habits and open to the only constant of this structure, that is, changeability and continuous evolution.

However, all the landings in real space, when the city gets materialized in actual galleries and vampirically feeds on new views to refresh its image, are scrupulously and systematically recorded. This is the only aspect of the history that is consistent with so-called reality and its chronological sequence. Moreover, this hybrid, delocalized and nomadic monad mocks any kind of form or order, constantly eluding any attempts to control it.

Past the Threshold of Alien City

The city in cyberspace teems with life, pulsates, transforms itself. It is in constant process, impossible to grasp or describe. It is processual, unstable, elusive and limitless. Past its threshold, a spectacle of changes is taking place; they constitute its essence and reflect the transformations of today's world, often described as the culture of fluidity. Inspiration for its creation came from different directions: literature and philosophy, futuristic visions of the historical avant-garde, redefinitions of historical narrations and ways of writing history, from both the fields of science and the Internet as well as the tradition of ideal cities. Such a creative synthesis of the above-mentioned aspects leads to the construction of a new kind of urban organism, which comes about right past the threshold of the material world and interacts with the Internet users who visit it. Everyone who, having clicked, sets his/her foot in *Alien City* automatically becomes its co-creator, actively participating in the transformative process. Each movement has its consequences—one cannot disappear in the crowd or only remain a *flâneur* observing the spectacle of the city from a distance without leaving one's mark on the substance of the city. However, one is not a foreigner inhabiting post-*polis*, but an alien who has to be aware of the consequences of his/her actions and the reevaluation of stereotypes. This is the consequence of a confrontation with the unprecedented type of the city that drifts in cyberspace. This structure stops, to paraphrase Derrida, at the threshold of a new figure and does not comply with the law of something different and something familiar. It creates its own, so far unknown principles.