Inside Out: When objects inhabit the streets

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ABSTRACT

This essay will explore the contemporary intersection of art and interior design on the level of social practice, surveying two projects that deal with pubic participation from a critical art perspective and Jacques Rancière's 'art as dissensus'. These 'design activations' offer urban inhabitants a phenomenological exchange that occurs with shifts between art and design, interior and exterior, and the subjective and intersubjective awareness of the city. A manual sewing machine and manual typewriter offer a different representation and experience of the Tenderloin District in San Francisco, the Berlin Wall and San Francisco parks.

INTRODUCTION

Walking in the city often brings surprises that undermine the regulatory structures of urban environments (work, transport, consumption and entertainment). On any given day we might participate in a public art project by rearranging lkea furniture; sit down in a parking space repurposed into a 'park' with tables, chairs and a cup of tea; watch a man mend clothes for the homeless; play a piano that has been placed for public use; or dictate a letter, to a typist using a manual typewriter. These kinds of spontaneous events are part of an increasing trend in urban cultures where cities are turned into laboratories for creative experimentation and civic action. Through subtle interventions, interactive performances and participatory artworks, many artists are reordering the use of urban public space, inviting the public to experience their urban habitat differently, and for philosopher Michel de Certeau, contribute to the stories, myths, dreams, experiences, and histories that connect people to a particular place.¹ These encounters create relationships and provide a connection to a city that is embodied through urban experiences, a revitalised collective imagining of urban life, inspiring a sense of awkwardness, unfamiliarity, conviviality, and even perhaps a sense of agency.

Inside Out considers how a participatory art project transforms into an urban activation – an object and experience that stimulates a site, socially, politically, or economically. I consider the agency imbued in these two objects – a manual sewing machine and a manual typewriter – as they pass from their domestic or work environments to unexpected sites in the urban environment. They cross the threshold between interior/exterior, entry/exit, and as such take on different significance. Their meaning as designed objects transforms in the urban landscape and becomes a mode of experiencing the city itself, a phenomenological encounter, and engenders agency in

the participating subject. This crossing might offer a change of behaviour, conduct, or experience. By following these two objects outside, we witness how their material trace reimagines what can happen or be felt in public spaces in San Francisco or Berlin. What ties my two examples together is the way in which often-obsolescent interior object(s) infiltrate the urban environment for a specific duration, and allow people to interact differently with these once-familiar objects that have been displaced into the urban landscape. These objects become a focal point around which social and political awareness and proximity increase, and as a consequence reposition individuals and newly formed publics.

The art discourse that includes 'social practice' and socially engaged artworks has gained visibility in public and institutional spaces. Over the past decade such urban interventions have proliferated, and many of them are outlined in the context of the city and globalisation in *Re-imagining the City: Art, globalisation and urban spaces* (2013) where the editors highlight diverse practices ranging from public art to the built environment.² Many public projects have now been absorbed into larger arts structures, most notably *Spontaneous Interventions*, first presented for the U.S. pavilion at the 13th (2012) Venice Architecture Biennale. It catalogues an ongoing phenomenon: the interventionist urbanism of architects, designers, artists and citizens responding to significant events like the Global Financial Crisis. Examples of scale and ambition range, and include Fritz Haeg's *Edible Estates* (2005-2013) and Ghana Think Tank's *Developing the First World* (ongoing). The expanded field of public art has also been used in the urban development and marketing of cities for political-economic benefit, which counters its social and aesthetic values.

An interior design perspective acts as a confluence with other fields of enquiry and practice – sociology, urbanism and anthropology – and in this context, public art practice. This intersection of ideas cultivates social exchange and highlights the ways in which art, design and urbanism can contribute to 'increasing societal awareness, and motivating and enabling political action'.³ The socio-cultural relationships engendered pivot around traditional design objects. Further, for design academic Mick Douglas, 'how a public art practice might animate and amplify these processes – and perhaps provoke a critical awareness of the role of the arts in the rhythms of uneven urban development.' ⁴ In this context I describe the design activation as a potentially transformative aesthetic experience, which I will argue offers an alternative to the purely instrumental functions of art.

I will describe each briefly in the context of its significance to public participatory art and interior design. It is the 'inside out' element of these projects that I find compelling and that speaks to the provocation of this journal issue on 'urban + interior'. I will first outline the frameworks in which I place these objects: curator and academic Suzie Attiwill's framework for urban interiors, and the theorists who have outlined how we conceive of our cities and subsequently resist the spatial constructions offered to us.⁵ To consider the possible effects of these urban encounters, I use French philosopher Jacques Rancière's 'art as dissensus' and 'distribution of the sensible' as a framework for analysis.⁶

THE CITY AND URBAN INTERIORS

cities to inform the transformative possibilities of interventionist reflects a more overt activist approach to achieving this right. activations. For example, the Situationists developed work that I would argue that the projects I describe function more subtly appealed to a collective and community model of creative practice, and much of that imagining remains the same: to respond to and which dissented from the dominant modes offered by the impoverished condition of everyday life and to create consumer capitalism and the institutionalisation of art. Techniques an alternative urban life that has meaning and is playful. But, such as the dérive and détournement were used to identify and as Harvey describes, 'as always with Lefebvre, conflictual and construct situations from existing forms to produce momentary dialectical, open to becoming, to encounters (both fearful ambiances that were provisional and lived.' ⁷ This led artists to and pleasurable), and to the perpetual pursuit of unknowable make work that existed beyond traditional artistic contexts so as novelty.¹² to facilitate the infiltration into other aspects of life.

consider the role of participatory art practices. In The Production of today; however, his call for the ability to imagine something of Space (1974) Lefebvre focuses on the processes of spatial different has been answered by many artists and designers. production; the multiplicity of spaces that are socially produced Theorists such Alana Jelenik, Claire Bishop and Maria Lind and made productive through social practices.⁸ He sees space contend that such interventions never actually dismantle as a complex social construction based on the social production institutionalised state power, and consequently, the conviviality of of meanings, which affects how we live in and perceive the city, social art practices, how they merge with life, are embedded in Lefebyre claims that the organisation of the urban time and the neoliberal structures that make them possible. While these space to fit the lived experience of its citizens and residents critiques are well noted, it is my belief that the intersubjective could become the focus for a renewal of direct democratic encounters at the heart of these projects offer possibilities that relationships in modern society. Lefebvre also described the 'right are not quantifiable, their effects ultimately unknown, and that to the city' as an assertion of assembly, access and movement, subtle activations are worthy of consideration. but also as right to imagine the city as something different than a place sanctioned or controlled by the State, and the highly The examples I have chosen link art, interior design (forms and designed and managed environment. He states, 'Among these materials) and urban spaces in ways not common to a traditional encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling think about domestication, work and leisure. Practices and the full and complete usage of these moments and places, etc.' materials that are normally interiorised, when brought outside,

seen a revival, which 'has everything to do with many people interiors influence relationships and the spaces between people. seeking some kind of response to a brutally neoliberalizing Following Attiwill's provocation, the repurposed interior object international capitalism that has been intensifying its assault on 'invites other possibilities for thinking and designing interiors the qualities of daily life since the early 1990s.¹⁰ Along with and the practice of interior design – and brings the sensibility

Harvey, the contributors to Cities for People, Not Profit investigate Lefebvre's critical urban theory in the context of struggles for Philosopher Henri Lefebvre, de Certeau and The Situationist social justice." The cry and demand that Harvey and others International are instrumental in considering the backdrop of describe primarily comes from urban social movements and

While prescient in 1968 and 1974, Lefebvre could not have Lefebvre's influential works on cities offers another lens to imagined the highly regulated, contained and surveilled cities

rights in the making features the right to the city, not to the understanding of interior design. Many 'typical' interiors have ancient city, but to urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of moved outside, taking over space, and influencing the way we create a sense of enclosure and proximity; people move closer Geographer David Harvey describes how Lefebvre's 'right' has to each other and these interiors or the materials displaced from

and techniques of interior design to the urban environment.'13 In this context then, these design activations operate by introducing heterogeneous material objects and artefacts into the urban field of perception in order to draw attention to specific issues such as participatory democracy, and provide a neighborhood meeting place, ultimately to occupy space differently. Attiwill describes how 'temporal occupations' can be offered as 'a way of inviting different modes of occupying space than through built form; temporal occupations produce and work the urban fabric in different ways.'¹⁴

For designers considering their role and relationship to public or social practices, interior elements can be displaced to the street in order to revitalise the public's relationship to them, whether through nostalgia, necessity, or to produce a convivial space. I hope by contextualising these as interior design activations in urban spaces – the street, a square, an alley, a park and so on – to raise awareness and reimagine these as a part of 'distributing of urban space and time and constructing alternative ways for individuals to participate and take part in a "common" public environment.¹⁵

SIT, TAP, SEW: ACTIVATING THE OBJECT

In 2004, in a project called I Wish to Say, then-resident of the American public opinion. San Francisco Bay Area artist Sheryl Oring decided to bring an 'office' outside to the streets. On a simple desk she placed Oring reworked this project for the city of Berlin, Germany. With a manual typewriter, clips and rubber stamps to mark cards as 'urgent' or 'incomplete'. Dressed as a 1950s-era secretary and Maueramt (2014) she set up a desk, chair and typewriter along the former East-West border. Mauer translates as 'wall,' amt armed with clerical skills, Oring sat in public spaces around San refers to 'office', 'agency', 'bureau' and 'department'. She sat in Francisco – a park and a flea market, for example – where she'd locations along the former Wall. Behind her foldout desk was a be able to draw the attention of people walking around. When they approached, perhaps curious about her and the typewriter, mid-century roll-top cabinet. In it she stored signs, paper and she offered to type a letter to the President of the United other office supplies, which gave the street installation a direct States, as a way of allowing the public to have a say about the simulation of an office environment. Oring's persona as a 1950s state of the nation. Corey Dzenko, who performed as secretary secretary doubled this effect. She asked questions such as: 'What alongside Oring for one of her I Wish to Say iterations, describes do you think about when you think about the Berlin Wall?' or why the public interacted: 'There is a comfort in familiarity. Our 'What would you like the world to remember about the Berlin beehives and flipped hairdos and outdated typewriters enticed Wall?'. Similar to I Wish to Say, she typed the answers on a manual older participants who remembered when they used this type typewriter. These were then recontextualised into an art exhibit of machine or wore garments similar to ours. Our appearances at the Museum of the Kennedys.

WRITE A POSTCARD TO THE PRESIDENT WISH TO SAY BY SHERYL ORING

and secretarial duties often reminded younger generations of their mothers or other female relatives. And, after some coaxing from adults, many of the child-participants approached us because they had never seen a typewriter before.'16 Many people took up her offer and dictated their wishes to her, and these letters were then displayed in gallery and museum contexts: a catalogue of words and voices; a historical archive of

Figure I : Sheryl Oring, I Wish to Say, 2004-ongoing. Photograph: courtesy Sheryl Oring and Dhanraj Emanuel.



Mauerant offered a context for Berliners to have their say about the Wall. The typing became a direct channel to history and contemporary issues on the streets of Berlin. What is interesting is that it not only taps into the historical memory of Berliners, and the difficulty of navigating such painful terrain, but also how such a project can subvert the political economy of the Berlin Wall. In his chapter *Art and Culture: the Global Turn*, cultural theorist Malcolm Miles describes how pieces of the Wall are now objects of consumer culture that have been sold at auction and placed adjacent to institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art.¹⁷

Using tools of journalism, in this context the focal point of the typewriter, Oring's work examines critical social issues through projects that incorporate old and new media. She tells stories, examines public opinion and fosters open exchange with those that encounter her work. The typewriter, aside from being functional, acts as a visual reminder of a time passed, a once-ubiquitous office object, now all but vanished from our sites. As we know, technology has displaced the humble typewriter, but not all it signifies, or symbolised in Oring's work. The typewriter became an 'urban' icebreaker; people were curious about her intentions. It invited conversation, let them open up and voice issues of concern. The act could arguably be nostalgic, and remind people of a time when democracy worked (if it ever did), when there were more perceived 'safe' spaces in which to express opinions. During her exchange she focused her attention, did not multitask, but simply listened and typed. For those who engaged in *Maueramt*, it encouraged Berliners to be self-determined in their memory of the Wall.

Oring's work functions in many ways: it invites a space for exchange for the passerby, it gives voice, it reveals a past, and imagines a slower world not lost to the dictates of fast-paced urban life. It may alter a sense that one has no voice by turning that feeling into one of agency, engendering new



conditions for urban experiences. Oring's typewriter in the context of public spaces also initiates what architect and activist Leslie Weisman sees as reclaiming a feminist domestic sphere in public space.¹⁸ Oring's performance presence, as a female office worker spilled into the street, helps to reclaim this visibility of office and domestic labour, and to highlight how much office work remains gendered. The performance, interaction and then installation shows Oring's ability to exploit the stereotypes of office workers through the use of costume and props, specifically the typewriter, and to conflate a time period's iconography with contemporary social issues.

I Wish to Say and Maueramt present a 'trace' of a tenuous issue for its target public.¹⁹ The artefacts presented, perhaps more so than the typewriter itself, represent a design trace in this context. By exchanging stories and then dictating them to a woman dressed as a 1950s office worker, there is inherent power, much like the traditional relationship between the boss/secretary that curator and educator Ellen Lupton outlines: the advent of typewriters and their associated histories of typing pools in office environments signifying uneven gender relations and the feminisation of industrial objects.²⁰ The trace of the Wall is formed through the stories and the letters, and then repositioned in an art context. Oring's positioning is twofold. On one hand, she reinforces the power dynamic of boss/secretary in these contexts. When people are dictating to her, she is dutiful, she doesn't interpret, but transcribes, reproducing this power dynamic as a performance. However, seen in an art context, I believe this becomes an ironic subversion since the outcomes indicate her power through her visibility on the street, her use of the typewriter, and ultimately of representing the dictated letters. This proposes new subjects and publics; pivoting around an experience and exchange with a typewriter, allowing new forms of perception for those willing to participate. This method of tracing helps to reveal and expose some of the underlying structures of gendered labor, post-Berlin Wall, and the erosion of democracy, by addressing memory and capital at one and the same time.

Opposite

Figure 2: Maueramt, 2014. Photograph: courtesy Sheryl Oring and Dhanraj Emanuel.

Above

Figure 3: Michael Swaine, The Free Mending Library, 2004-ongoing. Photograph: Daniel Gorrell.

streets of Delhi or Shanghai, but rarely are tailors exposed in Market areas). public view in developed countries. Clothes are made in factories Library. Swaine repurposed an ice cream cart, mounted it with allow a community to define itself.^{'21} All possible lived experiences so he stayed there.

throwaway culture, and instead give things a second life. Over of sewing on the sidewalks. the years he has changed his work to be more of a mending library by setting up several sewing machines so neighborhood Swaine wanted to meet people and exchange life stories. Over conviviality and service to an overlooked social group.

Reagan's tenure as Governor of California. The Tenderloin hosts has built up trust with the local community. In his words: the largest percentage of immigrant families in the city, many of whom fled the violence of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in the 1970s, and many of whom remain marginalised because of race, sexuality and gender. This neighbourhood fought off developers who targeted the area for redevelopment in the 1980s (after

It is not very often that people sew in public – perhaps on the the city had 'transformed' the Western Addition and South of

elsewhere, holes are mended in tailor shops or dry cleaners, and Close to popular Union Square, though dirty and unappealing to sewing rooms are fast disappearing from domestic interiors. tourists, the Tenderloin district remains vulnerable to city policy Artist Michael Swaine's public art project started out as Reap shifts and funding cuts. It has been ignored and neglected: 'It's a What you Sew (2004), although it now goes by The Free Mending neighborhood without the institutions and sense of cohesion that a treadle-operated sewing machine and placed it near Cohen are flattened out in the service of a singular representation that Alley in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco on the 15th of continues to re-inscribe power over residents. Writers Rob each month from 12-6pm. Swaine mends holes, darns socks Waters and Wade Hudson explain how this neighbourhood, and shares stories with those who come to visit him. He had with the help of residents as well as 'external' activists, now has pushed this cart around other areas of the city as part of a 'social' a stronger sense of community. Swaine's ongoing project is just sculpture' – a way of fabricating experiences instead of objects – one way this continues. For sociologist Fran Tonkiss, this type of but found that the folks in the Tenderloin district engaged more, engagement in urban space 'provides sites for political action and are themselves politicized in contests over access, control and representation.²² Swaine draws attention to difference and In a world where everything is thrown away, many people intervenes with these prescribed visual codes by giving a very want to keep things and mend or fix them instead. Swaine and misrepresented or underserved community visibility through an many residents of this neighborhood resist being a part of the artist's project – a voice made audible through his social practice

residents could learn to sew and mend their own clothes. the years this is what has happened, with a community growing Swaine's aesthetic and public practice not only challenges the around his event. Swaine considers the project a 'collaboration conditions of urban experience, but pivots around an outdated between himself and those whose clothes he patches, mends, and displaced sewing machine. And for him, in an underserved hems and darns – an opportunity to create social interaction community in San Francisco this enables a means of expression, where there would otherwise be none.²³ He found that despite the sewing machine's unlikely presence on the street, it was familiar to most people, and the chairs he put out also encouraged This poorest of San Francisco's neighbourhoods rests uneasily them to stop and stay for a chat, have a cup of chai from a nearby between the wealth of Nob Hill and the commercial zone of Indian restaurant or a sandwich prepared by one of the local Union Square; stigmatised as a ghetto, it is underserved in the residents. The extended duration of the project has allowed areas most needed – social services – with its funding cut during people to engage at their own pace, and as a consequence he

> There have been amazing moments because of the chairs and the sewing machine, which stops people, and the chairs invite them to stay. People with different life experiences sit down next to each other. It is rare for

[an] art patron or banker [who have often heard of Swaine's project] to actually sit next to someone who is down and out. Both are waiting for a service; two lines of people that don't meet. The service and the practicality of sewing add a point of cultural interest.²⁴

The sidewalk where Swaine keeps his machine cultivates a social ritual for the residents of the Tenderloin which revolves around the machine and influences the tenor of the streets, offering a challenge to the media representation of this district. The coming together becomes a physical and psychological act performed at the same time and place each month, giving way to a sense of ownership and belonging of the space he creates and the provisional public that forms.



Figure 4: Michael Swaine, The Free Mending Library, 2004-ongoing. Photograph: Daniel Gorrell.

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Both Oring and Swaine take familiar but obsolescent items from the domestic and work spheres into different contexts with similar effects. These two projects contribute to an urban fabric that offers texture to the built environment and reorders the spatial exchange for participants. The artists wished to provide an opportunity for some kind of creative activity with the aim of promoting critical questions about urban life, but found instead people's willingness to form instant communities to work together on a shared goal and an interesting option for the expression of self-empowered human agency.

These projects I describe facilitate improvised and spontaneous public participation and provide a means by which people might interact with urban structures and other people in new and interesting ways. They also engender a localised spectacle and enlist an actively participating local public that 'makes' the art rather than serving as a passive consumer of product offered by the corporate entertainment industries. The artists reconfigure the social encounters in the city as Lefebvre might have imagined. I am not suggesting that a sewing machine or a typewriter can usher in democracy in communities with such uneven social and economic relations as the Tenderloin district in San Francisco, but it holds possibilities of social cohesion and the rituals of sidewalk culture. Much of the evidence of these projects' efficacy remains anecdotal, but looking at video documentation of each shows a willing and often emotional public, the quality of exchange, and an interest in the objects. As such, these operate in a manner that Douglas describes: 'There is an aesthetic practice in operation here, activating modes of enlivened inhabitation that deterritorialise the tendencies of accumulating essentialist local identity and authority of place.'²⁵

Oring's and Swaine's work resists typical definitions of public art and subsequently typical notions of social and political engagement. These practices are collective in nature; that is, the context and outcomes are produced together with audiences or publics. The threshold between the interior and exterior world works through a phenomenological exchange: the experience does not transport the public away from the world but reworks the stuff of the world – artefacts from interiors – albeit with different items. These objects then produce new combinations, new ways of bringing a memory of an older world 'into' the self, a new kind of subjectivity in relation to contemporary issues. These frameworks help elucidate how public space, democracy and participation interface with objects to advance an understanding of their potential as design interventions.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Displaced interior objects and structures attract and foster the creative instincts of urban populations by offering them an extraordinary/out of the ordinary experience. These urban activations bring to life interactive and creative modes of civic engagement, an encounter with objects (facilitated through performing subjects) set against the backdrop of the workings of city life. These projects use conceptual frameworks that take interior elements to the streets, creating performative displays that support and help expand the cultures of local communities in urban life.

These temporary occupations of space, conscious of objects and people and the relations they engender, 'situates us in an enunciative and performative relationship to the world (and to art), where meanings *take place*, in what the theorist and curator lrit Rogoff calls "the where of now", by making a form of location through inhabiting temporal duration.²⁶ The interactions with the artists and their objects can help shape our perceptions and encourage psychological self-determination at a time when many people feel powerless in the face of the growing political injustice enacted upon individuals and communities globally.

Invoking philosopher Jacques Rancière helps to broaden the scope to reception; an approach that might provide a productive reordering of how we engage in these types of activations and their reception in urban contexts. Rancière outlines the 'distribution of the sensible' as how we perceive, and that which regulates that perception of our social roles and the subsequent affective response. Rancière expands upon philosopher Immanuel Kant's aesthetics, taking up the irresolvable relationship between the mind and the senses. The aesthetic requires a suspension of the rules that govern the ways people move through the world, 'a redistribution of the relations between the forms of sensory experience.²⁷ The social in art cannot be separated from aesthetics, or from subjective experience. These categories bleed into one another every time any artwork reaches a public. This is further exacerbated by the displaced interior object, adding a layer of dissonance, another opportunity for a new intersubjective experience with an artist and their object in an urban context, producing a 'disruptive aesthetic'. Contextualised as a design activation through displaced interior artefacts, 'art as dissensus' then breaches 'the boundaries between what is supposed to be normal and what is supposed to be subversive, between what is supposed to be active, and therefore political, and what is supposed to be passive or distant, and therefore apolitical.²⁸ The dissonance or uncertainty acts on people's senses, perception, and subsequently their emotions and interpretations of their urban experience. They disrupt existing paradigms of shared meaning (the distribution of the sensible) and values, and then propose new ones. It is this aesthetic dimension, the intended effect of the designed artifacts, and their insertion into cultural processes that can contribute to a reimagining of urban life.

Such work may provide a sense of community between artists and an opportunity for collective meaning-making, yet these 'experiences' have potential to become another commodity or form of entertainment in the spectacular global city. We can critique the artists or sanctioning institutions when such engagements become superficial, unethical, or do not ameliorate the deeper alienation and disengagement from the social and political aspects of the urban and public sphere.²⁹ This is a complex and contradictory issue, and I do not believe that the design activations discussed in this essay operate superficially nor do they make claims for deeper structural changes.

Indeed their potential may rest in the symbolic realm, and can still have an affective response. The political potential of urban activation projects such as these remains in their capacity to engage the general public and to generate broader political and social transformations. Here, the

activations create disruptive aesthetics and opportunities that elude the regimentation of life and work promulgated by surveillance, containment, corporate capital and its instrumentalisation of human creativity. The works discussed demonstrate that urban space can have a multitude of functions and is indeed far more flexible and fluid than often conceived; and more, that it is a living and creative space that expands the possibilities of experience through the participatory practices of provisional publics.³⁰ Rancière describes this as 'establishing an element of interdeterminacy in the relationship between artistic production and political subjectivity.³¹

This understanding of urban activations is represented by connections that are established with audiences and communities to promote a greater self-awareness about the role individuals can play in urban life. In this context the opportunity to explore new perceptions and conceptions can empower people in the belief that the city offers experiences that reach far beyond utilitarian dictates, and that there is the possibility of multiple creative modes of engagement in an urban sphere. In addition, these 'interventions' and 'disruptive aesthetics' in daily life might reflect a challenge to the 'distribution of the sensible' because the encounters with interior objects are unfamiliar, disorienting and unregulated. Ultimately, they aim to disrupt our sense of the contemporary world, our understanding of what can happen in public space, who and what can be highlighted in that space, and what can be said in that space. These types of activations – participatory and urban - forge the way towards these new cultural forms in a world that needs innovative ways to encourage people and communities to challenge the inequities presented to them, and experience something different.

What I hope emerges are urban activations, interior objects or otherwise, which contribute to a larger discourse of what the materials of interior design can do in public space. It may be difficult to measure the 'success' of these projects, or the social outcomes, if any, that they offer - it may be better to think in terms of the questions they raise regarding the ability to challenge the 'distribution of the sensible' and subsequently reimagine an urban life based on these encounters.

NOTES

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