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Inventing S-E-X

It was a birthday celebration in May 2004 that brought us to *Gimes*, a new Restaurant on Viale Europa in Torre del Lago Puccini, Versilia, Italy. *Gimes* is a stylish eatery with huge expanses of glass, lots of white tablecloths, lighted candles, twinkling wine glasses, halogen spots, flowers and all the typical accessories you would expect to be around in a formal dining place. At first we hesitated. There was a conspicuous couple sitting right next to the entrance, the woman wearing golden stilettos and a tight skirt, while her male companion's expression was decidedly marked by a fake suntan and long blonde, curly hair. Originally, we had planned to have dinner at the *Europa* fish restaurant, but the place did not seem to be a gay favourite any longer. When we saw a group of butch and stylish lesbians, whom we had noticed earlier during their *corso*, strolling up and down Viale Europa, enter what seemed to be the »new place« now, we decided to follow them.

To our surprise the glitz and glamour of the Hollywoodesque *mise-en-scène* of the restaurant was in startling contrast to the quality of the food being served – pizza being the main draw. But then, maybe *Gimes* is not really just a restaurant. It bills itself as »Gimes – Music Café – Unconventional Place.« There was in fact a gorgeous bloke playing funky house and disco tunes, putting on a big show, though his audience consisted of no more than a handful of dining customers, his all too obvious bulge begging for the attention of their bumped-up bodies, and there were endless scenes of rejoicing between a group of three hyper-masculine scene queens and our group of intellectually styled lesbians. This mixture and hybridisation of forms and attitudes was not only in many ways thrilling to watch, but also produced the charm and the atmospheric sensation of a certain potentiality, closure and opening, regard and disregard at once. All interests and efforts were directed towards the stage act, as if to the gestural potential of things, and not to the scripted codes of conduct, to how things have to be done. Epitomising this, the staff at *Gimes* did not seem to have put much thought into how the service in a restaurant is supposed to be run. Instead they had put a lot of effort into their own visual and bodily appearance and now displayed a joy in rehearsing it with an attentive, albeit slightly ignorant naivety. In effect, everybody at *Gimes*, including

us, were taking part in a play of desire, addressing each other as if best friend, foremost companion, special guest, adored celebrity or sexual playmate, in an illusion of relatedness beyond the technicality of assigned roles, all encounters performed centre-stage. Whenever one enters into the assumed disposition and exposes oneself to that instant, another layer of want is revealed. On a similar note, *Gimes*' business card offers a series of names and mobile numbers: if you want to book a table at *Gimes* you do not call a receptionist, but Fabrizio, Piero or Amedeo aka Titti.

This brings back another recollection, memories of a brief encounter we had earlier that evening, outside the bright lights of the restaurant, in the darker shadows of the local cruising ground. While strolling along one of the central cruising tracks through the woods, we had caught sight of a person having a loud conversation on his mobile phone: a stocky, elderly man wearing a black leather jacket with the letters *S-E-X* printed across the back. What did this simplest expression of want signify while cruising for sex? We found ourselves amidst an amalgam of things without unambiguous belonging, things that did not fit, neither there nor anywhere else, and had to realise that cruising this site, both here in this text and back there, becomes a complex process of invention, as cruising is not concerned with an inner truth, but deploys tactics for producing (bodily) pleasures. In this, cruising is not only a way of inhabiting space but also a way of imagining the spacing of meaning, the forming of contiguities.

All these gestures, looks, movements and suggestions play with a sense of morphological excess; they approximate and expose the normative ideal in that they are undecidedly positioned between the norm and its failure. They complicate any possible reading by complicating the limits of accessible categories for judging them. The ›capitalisation‹ of *S-E-X* penetrates our boundaries and makes ourselves the object that is to be read by the other. An in-your-face casualness turns us into its object of desire. We feel an entanglement which is not constituted by theoretical speculation, but by something which emerges as an allegedly improper version of the real. A demand to perform something without having to say something about it. Furthermore, a demand to remodel these improprieties, to recast this theory-generating space. How are we supposed to read *S-E-X* in this situation? How does it initiate us into the dramatisation of a phantasmatic pursuit that mobilises identifications? Does *S-E-X* in addressing us here in its utmost anonymity question the politics of iterability, a »repetition which works at once to legitimate and delegitimize the realness norms by which it is produced?«¹ But should we ask these questions at all? Shouldn't we rather feel confused finding ourselves facing *S-E-X* and yet not really facing it.

Cruising for *S-E-X* is not just an intellectual meandering, a detached visual indulgence which keeps us apart. It privileges arousal, mutuality and penetration. It stimulates undecidability and rupture. Unlike the flaneur – the ultimate figure of being *in* the street but never *of* the street, who looks but is rarely seen, thus maintaining

a distant relation to the landscape he moves through – the generative potential of the cruiser’s engagement lies in the idea of the actual involvement in a sexual act, something which triggers an arousal that always precedes and exceeds theory. It is this arousal of meeting yet being not quite present to each other which Adrian Rifkin has recently commented on in his keynote address at the *Queer Matters* conference in London by inventing a fictitious theorist, David, who always thinks about sex when he does theory and thinks about theory whenever he has sex.² This contact of theory and sex, this closeness which stresses the distancing it opens up, a distancing between each other and in relation to the mutual ends, brings us not only to consider the cruising grounds of the Italian Versilia, but also our own realms of theories and histories, not only to reflect upon the goings-on, the performative undecidabilities and hidden spots in the Italian pine woods, but also to become aware of ruptures underlying our own fields of theoretical concern. How can we claim *S-E-X* for theory? How can we confuse it with a figure that feels no embarrassment about neglecting the situated codes of silence by lending itself to the banalities of a mobile phone conversation and that does not feel out of place in wearing an almost unwearable sex jacket, in speaking, as it were, beyond what is sayable? It is a confusion of these kinds, David’s confusion of sex and theory, *S-E-X*’s confusion of coded behaviour, which opens up a space of impropriety ready for dialogues beyond the stage of the already given, the constellations accepted as fulfilling the demands of proper signification. This confusion not only echoes the physical trajectories, the groping and touching in the pine woods, but also the procedures and inventions, the sedimentations, collages, citations and failures of memory we employ in the realm of theory, the coming together of a complex set of materials on grounds outside the dominant archives of power. On an even more challenging note, this confusion of sex and theory opens up a space of entangled theoretical inquiry, an involvement which does not leave us untouched, but complicates our own limits of sensing, reasoning and judging.

The morphological ideal that remains the standard of the performed act splits off from its appropriation and is exposed, while something new emerges, something that lacks full signification, categorisation and knowledge. Instead it offers a sense of gesturality, a circulation of images entrenched in playful deferrals and in fleeting visual exchanges between cruisers, waiters and clients of all sorts. Found without being lost, such is the character of this flow of images. It is moving in and out of contexts as different lines of perception move across the ever changing objects of signification. Issues of origin are rendered irrelevant, hidden in a multiplicity of origins. As Jean-Luc Nancy argues, the origin is always affirmation *and* distancing: »We do not gain access; that is, we do not penetrate the origin; we do not identify with it. More precisely, we do not identify ourselves in it or as it, but *with* it«³. This multitude of absences and deferrals, the inevitable inaccessibility of an initial signification

generates a matrix dominated by tears, rifts and gaps longing for re-articulation as a formative force of invention, as a mode of entering into new relationships. It favours an aesthetics in which we can be in ourselves without being recognisable as a fully categorisable subject, an aesthetics of rupture and ineffability.

In actual fact this is a revisiting of Versilia, some 50 miles of sandy beaches, dense pine woods and agricultural hinterland interspersed with a sprawling conurbation along the SS1 in western Tuscany. The words »by car and on foot by night, also nearby areas, in the pinewood«⁴ guide us towards the local cruising ground in Torre del Lago Puccini, a small village five miles south of Viareggio, a region that has become an increasingly popular destination for gay holiday travellers in recent years. This description of where to cruise can be found in the *Spartacus* Gay Guide, issue 2001.⁵ Right next to it, an advertisement by the local tourist agency metaphorically promotes Versilia as the new Mykonos of Italy. Here we want to follow these directions, the dialogues between dislocated images, gestures and wordings, the excitements they promise and, particularly, look at the implications that aesthetic and sexual practices such as cruising have on our understanding of knowledge, its formation and the production and deferral of spatial meaning.

To the passing tourist, the stretch of land between Viareggio and Torre del Lago Puccini appears to be just one in many typical Italian shorelines along the upper Adriatic or along the Ligurian coast. Driving along this line we are exposed to the steady view of a seemingly indifferent vegetation. The sea itself remains out of sight, hidden behind patches of pine wood, which here and there are split up into small plots of camping sites. Every so often a road leads on to a drive running parallel to the sea facing side of the pine wood. These cul-de-sac then turn into parking lots next to the dunes. While there are some visible marks of civilisation and infrastructure either side of the pine wood, the wood not only operates as a dividing screen but in itself appears impermeable and impenetrable – not only as a separation, but as a spatial in-between, an outside which disrupts both ways and does not lend itself to the scope of an unsuspecting gaze. As we drive through the shady tunnel of pine trees along Viale Kennedy, coming up to the dissolving brightness of the sea, we immerse ourselves in another world, into an almost cinematic narrative. We enter a space in which reality blends into invention, an outside brimming with pleasure. This is an outside which is at the same time an in-between, a distancing that gives space to the exceptional. It mediates between the safe grounds of everyday life and the unstable experience of play, curiosity and joy. It indicates the end of stability and the beginning of impropriety and adventure. Thus, it involves narratives of danger, experimentation, discovery, visual pleasure and performativity. It is a mysterious Alice-in-Wonderland, like blank spots on the canvas, territory lacking signification, an unscripted in-between, nameless landscape. It offers no transparency, either from without or from within.

Sliding along various pockets of this wood, their specificities remain undetected by the tourist's gaze. Such a lack of visual difference may initially suggest indifference of meaning. However, theory has come to understand space as more than just a composite of solid matter, as fully determined by its marks, cartographies and perceptions, in short as a place that can be grasped in its totality by means of representation. Rather, space has been conceptualised as an always provisional site continuously renegotiated and reconfigured by the movements, thoughts, feelings and acts of its inhabitants. The production of space reverberates the situated sensibility and inherent instability of subjectivities, real-time formations of differentiated perspectives, expectations, desires and doubts. Thus space always remains something other, distant, unknown, unexpected, which eludes itself from universal classification and totalised knowledge.

Cruising is restricted to a particular part of this pine wood, and although a few hundred yards up or down the coast the visible formation looks very much the same, there will be little chance of a successful sexual adventure. The fact that a particular section of this pine wood has become a place for anonymous sexual encounters has little to do with a specific local shaping of the material characteristics of this area as such. Cruising reconfigures human territoriality by relying on the performative nature of its sexual geographies of seduction, closeness and excess to become its form of historical representation. Lately, we have become increasingly fascinated by the ambiguous nature of these almost mystical spaces, which seem to queer what belonging as an expression of spelling out clear rules, procedures and boundaries, of determining a particular spatial order may mean to history and culture. Cruising does not belong, nor do the subjectivities it creates. It is a complex passage of un-belongings mixed with a series of incomplete translations, which aligns to the phenomenological character of waiting, a practice that in Adrian Rifkin's words is »both alert to the field of observation and utterly blind.« He continues: »It is where, or it is while, where and while at one and the same time, the subject pays the greatest possible attention to signs, precisely to see if they are signs, or if they in fact signify and lead the subject to an object or a concept, where or while the subject closes its eyes and its other senses as far as possible, precisely to see what happens next.«⁶

What is so fascinating about cruising as an alternative walking practice, about strolling through these grounds, is their visual vagueness and indifference, the non-material manifestation of cruising, which allows us to slip in and out any time, any place, to complicate the boundaries of inside and outside, to simultaneously cruise and wander around enjoying the fleeting moments of an ever-changing and yet persistent landscape. These often dramatic changes in spatial meaning independent of material objectification draw upon the qualities of landscape's presence exterior to our own conceptualisation of space. Landscape is saturated with something both impre-



Fig. 1: ventures, ThinkArchitecture, © ThinkArchitecture

cise and singularised, something beyond the so-called public domain, an exterior to the space that theory generates. How can we take the extreme exteriority of landscape, the excitement of *Gimes* and the promise of *S-E-X* into our own field of theory? How can we employ the wisdom of these trajectories in our own fields as an epistemological model that helps us escape the old rhetorics of catching up with history?

Cruising has been suggested as an epistemological model more than once.⁷ First, this implies an approach to the phenomenology of cruising itself that takes into account issues of performativity, temporality, singularity, criticality and difference. To understand cruising as a model of epistemic inquiry requires us to be alert not to allow ourselves to be trapped by supposed needs of scientific duties or by the pathos of an avant-garde desire to discover what had so far been hidden from a hegemonic, heteronormative public – both aiming to transpose the newly discovered into the sphere of visibility and signification, where it can be represented, utilised and acknowledged as space. There is nothing to be gained, if knowledge about a spatial practice such as cruising is produced within the given heteronormative assumptions of space. Cruising does not foster a centrally conceived, bodiless place, void of pleasure, but constitutes an eroticised and sexualised subjectivity based upon participation.

Letting cruising speak to theory formulates tactics of a relational aesthetics, in which the fantasies and the imaginary of cruising as trajectories through space dis-

solve traditional rules and forms of knowledge, liquefying it and making it more susceptible to changes in meaning, inscribed over time through imaginary projections rather than through changed or changing matter. Just as cruising can be understood as an effect of movement and not as an activity within a given composite of elements, theory may be conceptualised as emerging at the limits of what we think we know. On our way developing models of cruising theory we encounter a conception of bodily, psychic and cultural desire that does not direct itself solely towards itself. Rather, this desire brings out a dynamic in whose trajectories and meanderings something new emerges: a space able to accommodate the ever-changing qualities of lived difference. As cruising cannot be fixed unambiguously and be attributed to landscape as an inherent property, it is always able to be ahead of processes of signification, demarcation and commodification. »The unmarked«, Peggy Phelan argues, »is not spatial; nor is it temporal; it is not metaphorical; nor is it literal. It is a configuration of subjectivity which exceeds, even while informing both the gaze and language.«⁸ To bring the promise of cruising, of self-invention, the fantasies of other subjectivities being intertwined simultaneously into the here and now, requires recognition of the fact that difference cannot be fully represented by formulae and programmes, by mappings and cartographies; a kind of aesthetic tactics performing a fleeting encounter with Gilles Deleuze's notion of différentiation in the pine woods of Torre del Lago: an immanent process of différent/ciation, which always takes place prior to and independent of any terminological and systematic re-presentation or identification. Différentiation repeats less the same – the same differences – but the process of différent/ciation, the active creation of differences.

Does this impetus mean that we have to slip into the jacket of *S-E-X* (this may, after all, not be an all too comfortable prospect for everyone)? We may not have to slip into *S-E-X* literally, yet the realm of sexuality is certainly an important site for self-invention, as Michel Foucault has famously remarked on the gay bathhouse. Or as a visitor to a 1970s New York bathhouse was quoted as saying by Ira Tattelman: »When one left the bath, the world looked different.«⁹ And it is this point of leaving the bathhouse, the cruising grounds of Torre del Lago – the immediate stage of self-invention itself – that becomes the focal point of our interest here. It is this intersection of a myriad of paths, which meet to be transformed, the point where self-invention leads to change, that makes the world look different. This reciprocal intrusion of inside and outside, this momentary collapse of boundaries, not only maintains the realm of playful encounter, but also exposes it to the larger economies that count as knowledge. In constantly touching the inside, the outside generates a distancing, a spacing of meaning that doesn't leave itself unchanged. To explore this intersection, to immerse oneself in this coming together, is to resist the dominant politics of knowledge and its regimes of power, to recognise the unrecognisable, to enter the ›outside‹ of intelligibility.

This endeavour of writing connects us to a series of writings, from Renaud Camus and Derek Jarman¹⁰ to the video works produced by Del LaGrace Volcano, Kutlug Ataman or Isaac Julien. We become accomplices of an outside to theory, formerly contained within the narrow classifications of art, which has itself become an important force in our epistemological inquiries outside the agreed body of knowledge. To take part in this endeavour means to accept our entanglement in the structures we describe, to inhabit these fields without highly moralised attitudes in order to see what possibilities this opens up. We don't have to slip into *S-E-X* literally, but we certainly have to enter the woods in order to leave them feeling changed, to reach that salient point of stepping out, where outside and inside touch upon each other, feel close despite their incommensurable yet constituting distance. To enter the woods means to be ready to become the object of desire of the other. To recognise one's part in what passes between us. To exit one's own paradigm and participate in realities out of the unnamed. To accept the ways in which we become part of the self-invention of others, to be ourselves transformed by the performances we are thrown into. In order to experience this point of self-invention, theory has to allow itself to be consumed by others. To learn from cruising is to follow its attitude, to absorb its perspectives: To understand culture not only through its visual and material attributes; rather to conceive culture through our bodily entanglement and to open it up to the immediate, the unexpected and uncanny of trajectories in multi-layered narratives, to notice the outside as it touches upon an inside. Elizabeth Grosz writes: »(There is) an instability at the very heart of sex and bodies, the fact that the body is what it is capable of doing, and what any body is capable of doing is well beyond the tolerance of any given culture.«¹¹

This outside is not the exterior of a subject or the exterior of a subject's or culture's own representation of its limit, but rather is a force that disrupts and intervenes to break down expectations and to generate inventions, enabling thus emergence and eruption of subjectivity and culture.¹² In this sense, the problematics of this aesthetics need to be discussed with regard to issues of translation: How is it possible to mediate between the emergence of cultural phenomena and the writing of theoretical constructs? Are there ways which guide us from the pine woods of Torre del Lago Puccini to a multiplicity of other aesthetics? We connect to other archives through forms of relational aesthetics, forms of participation in the production of meaning which are not dependent on an immediately legible interaction between Being and matter. Ways into these labyrinthine archives touch upon moments of seduction, collages, fragments, gestures and voices of other narratives and proximities. A relational aesthetics allows us to develop geographies and archives in which we ourselves become present in space, not merely as decoders and decipherers, but as essential to the process of spatialisation. This aesthetics is characterised by blurred contours

and impure appropriation: in integrating the fictitious into our spatial experience we open up space for modes of participation, allowing for both the emergence of a complex and contradictory multi-inhabitation and the effects of spatial proximity and difference.

The sensation of Viale Europa and its adjacent woods of Torre del Lago Puccini lies in contaminating the politics of truth, in crossing the boundaries of an agreed inside, in allowing oneself to be seduced by all the misunderstandings and exaggerations, by illogical conversations, illicit encounters and improper translations between the inside and its representation to an outside which never fully becomes itself. There is no success to its becoming in the sense that there is no end to it which remains on the outside. It cannot be contained within the secluded aura of invention. Like every move which is prone to the regimes of visualisation, it necessarily follows the paths of representation in our globalised economies of images, fashion, data, practices and commodities, turning what has once been seen as lacking signification into the most popular site (e.g. as observed by Massimo Vitali's photo *Mamamia I* – a cheering crowd in front of the local cruising area during the pride



Fig. 2: 2004 Mamamia, Massimo Vitali, Mamamia I 2002, © Courtesy of Hilger Contemporary Vienna

festival in 2002). In relating to such archives which complicate the boundaries of inside and outside (a dynamic set of real and fictitious narratives, memories, fantasies and practices) theory can suggest a way of speaking which gives rise to an unmediated simultaneity of appearance and meaning. A landscape emerges criss-crossed by almost unrecognisable traces and paths which link writing to *S-E-X*. In this unruly linkage one risks venturing into darkness, entering into the uncertain, into zones of impropriety and non-knowledge. In describing the woods we are writing ourselves as we begin to form part of the wood, of the texts and desires that create its darkness and arousing illusions – inventing a field of theory, paths of thinking arousal, which make us return to these woods again and again.

Notes

- 1 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, London 1993, 131.
- 2 Adrian Rifkin, *Confessions of a Gay Lacanian, or the Parable of the Master who Laughed*. Keynote address at Queer Matters conference, King's College London, 28 May 2004, unpublished manuscript.
- 3 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford 2000, 10-11.
- 4 Spartacus International Gay Guide 2001, Berlin 2000, 585.
- 5 »Enter any bookstore in the western world and you will surely be able to find paperback travel handbooks such as the Spartacus International Gay Guide. Now in its twenty-eighth edition, this most popular and detailed ›Baedeker‹ offers over 25.000 addresses of accommodation and places of entertainment throughout the world, with accompanying descriptions, evaluations, warnings and enticements. Among the encomia included in its promotional material are such outré descriptions of the book as ›the gay bible‹, suggesting the devotion with which readers turn to its pages in preparation for world travel.« John Hawley, preface, in: idem, ed., *Postcolonial and Queer Theories*, Westport/CT and London 2001, ix-xiii, here ix.
- 6 Adrian Rifkin, *Waiting and Seeing*, in: *Journal of Visual Culture* 2/3 (2003), 325-341, here 337.
- 7 See for instance Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett and Susan Leigh Foster, eds., *Cruising the Performative. Interventions into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality*, Bloomington 1995; *Cruising the Archive* lecture by Simon Ofield, *Future Past of Visual Culture 1*-conference, Tate Britain, London, 23 February 2002, unpublished manuscript; Helge Mooshammer, *by car and on foot by night, also nearby areas, in the pine wood*, in: Peter Mörtenböck and idem, eds., *Visuelle Kultur. Körper-Räume-Medien*, Vienna, Cologne and Weimar, 2003, 47-78; Mark W. Turner, *Backward Glances. Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London*, London 2003.
- 8 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance*. London 1996, 27.
- 9 Ira Tattelman, *The Meaning at the Wall: Tracing the Gay Bathhouse*, in: Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter, eds., *Queers in Space. Communities. Public Places. Sites of Resistance*, Seattle/WA 1997, 391-406, here 405.
- 10 See for instance Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature. The Journals of Derek Jarman*, London 1992; Renaud Camus, *Tricks 1 and Tricks 2*, Berlin 1999 (1987).
- 11 Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion. Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, London 1995, 214.
- 12 See *The Nature of Culture*, lecture by Elizabeth Grosz at the *MeCCSA conference*, University of Sussex, 21 Dec. 2003. Lecture notes quoted in: Petra Gemeinböck, *Negotiating the Virtual. Inhabiting Architectures of Emergence and Remoteness*, unpublished phil. diss., Vienna University of Technology, Vienna 2004, 156.