



## ARTICLES AND TREATISES / ARTYKUŁY I ROZPRAWY

### **The city as experience and inspiration Critical reflections on urbanity in contemporary art<sup>1</sup>**

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#### ABSTRACT

In this paper I am proposing to investigate some possible connecting points between art, aesthetics and the urban experience, more precisely how the perception and experience of the city as well as the features of urban life can inspire artists. At the same time, I am also curious how artworks can be used to understand this urban experience, as well as how they can be interpreted as not only simple descriptions and depictions, but also as active contributions and modes of suggesting solutions to the most pressing issues of contemporary cities and of city life. Hence my primary aim is discussing some approaches towards the aesthetic analyses of urbanity through modern and contemporary examples. In this way I am focusing less on how the city appears as a mere motive in artworks, or how it is used as main object or background element indicating the context in representations; and I am also not aiming to provide a survey analyses of the numerous ideas of the aesthetics of urbanity. Instead of these, here I am concentrating on how urbanity and the experiencing of the city(life) in itself as well as its multifaceted aspects can become a source of inspiration and at the same time a critically analysed subject, i.e. a concept that is examined through the work itself.

#### KEYWORDS

art and the city; aesthetics of urban experience; inspiration from the city(life); critiques of urban transformation; city and place

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“When one walks down a street the sensation is not only a visual one, but a tactile and sound experience. The artist can no longer concern himself with illusions, he must work on a realistic basis” (Willats, 1961). The brief quote from the 1961 manifesto of the British artist Stephen Willats clearly describes not only the features of modern and contemporary urban experience, but also the way how this complex mode of sensing the city could and should inspire artists; how they can convert their experiences into new works — such works that then aim to thematise the very concept of urbanity too. Following Willats’ ideas, in this article I am investigating some aspects in the complex experience of and inspiration from urbanity in art, with a special focus on some curious examples of contemporary artists’ oeuvres. Hence my primary aim is discussing some approaches towards the aesthetic analyses of urbanity through modern and contemporary examples. In this way I am focusing less on how the city appears as a mere motive in artworks, or how it is used as main object or background element indicating the context in representations. Nor am I intending to survey the history of aesthetic ideas connected to cities or to give an inclusive overview of theories at the intersection of urbanism, art and aesthetics. Instead of these, I am more interested in how urbanity and the experiencing of the city(life) in itself as well as its multifaceted aspects can become a source of inspiration and at the same time a critically analysed subject, i.e. a concept that is examined through the work itself.

Willats’ short affirmation from the manifesto above first indicates the importance of an overall approach when perceiving the urban context. Besides sensing the urban reality visually, that nevertheless remains a primary form of experiencing the city, the other senses shall also be taken in consideration: the analyses of the tactile and sonic elements in the urban perception can become just as important. Cities are often connected to their special sensory input, both on a personal level and a collective imagination: the picturesque mediaeval Tuscan hillside towns visited and discovered by walking we often remember right through the sonic experience of silence that is less and less known for the inhabitants of modern megapolises — those bustling huge cities that, on the other hand are often remembered by the constant background noise of their continuous traffic. Other towns are often predominantly noticed through olfactory qualities, as anyone having visited Venice for example can prove it. The understanding of this multisensory feature of the city experience urged theoreticians and aestheticians of urbanity to include these factors in their examination of the aesthetic qualities connected to cities. As Maria Popczyk argued in her Introduction to a thematic block on the aesthetics of the city in *Argument: Biannual Philosophical Journal*:

The notion of *aisthēsis*, taken in the broad sense of combining sensory, cognitive and moral perceptions, expands the concept of beauty beyond that of art (architecture or

urban planning) to include all phenomena that take place in the space of the city, such as the activity of strolling, or of dirt and cleanliness (Popczyk, 2015: 331 — italics in the original).

While on the one hand this multi-sensory experience definitely contributes to the establishment of a certain sense of attachment to the city, on the other hand however, Willats righteously also urges the artists of focusing on the “realities”, instead of being concerned with “illusions”. In his approach this meant taking off from real, actual problems and offering solutions, as well as initiating public discourse on possible ways of meliorating the urban reality. Though considered an important conceptual artist, Willats’ artistic practice from the 1960s onwards was truly “practical” and not merely conceptual, and his works were directed towards the analyses of social interactions, relationships and of the influence on the urban and social realities on the forming and maturing of identity. His well-known piece titled *What made me like I am* (1978) for example shows a young woman walking between two fenced territories, while on the diagram-like board various elements of her social framework, concepts and institutions are shown. Thus when — as written on the top part of the same work — one is “Trying to understand myself as a social product”, various personal and social references are taken into considerations, including “My identity, My values, My codes and My behaviours”, investigated in relationship with references to the other concept frames: “Another understanding, Another conclusion, Another perception, Another intention”. The work analyses those structures based on which one both establishes her social status and recognises her limits when forced to conform to the expected behavioural patterns<sup>2</sup>. As mentioned above however, Willats did not only theorised about these social points of references, but was actively engaged in proposing ways of interaction with members of the society, exhibiting his works in public spaces, libraries, cultural centres and residential areas, with the aim of not only illustrating the relationship between the individual and his social (and urban) context, but also to emphasise the function of art in “structuring society and empowering individuals” (Erdemci, 2014: 103). The importance of Willats’ work thus lies exactly in this understanding of the responsibility of the artist when describing and questioning the issues of the public, social and urban context. This caring analyses of the experience of urbanity through actual works of art what becomes highly interesting.

Naturally the history of the aesthetic analyses of the urban experience can be traced back to much earlier than the 1960–1970s. However, in many of these previous instances the examination of urbanity was primarily pursued in connection with Nature, and/or merely directed to its comparison or even juxtaposition with the tranquillity of suburban or rural life. It was the

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<sup>2</sup> See more on the work at: <http://stephenwillats.com/work/what-made-me-i-am/> (18.11.2018).

modernisation of capitals throughout the nineteenth century that significantly urged artists to find new ways of describing and analysing the urban experience. In the “Hausmannised” cities, i.e. when the so far rather organically growing mediaeval towns were converted into the planned city centres of the modern metropolises, the inhabitants had to face several types of previously non-existing issues — apart from obviously also enjoying certain benefits of the modern urban centres. The new city life increased social flexibility, while the formerly rigid borders between the various shifts in the hierarchy of the society quickly started to blur. The experiencing of the unusual had become the usual experience. The constant facing of the other was both an attractive and frustrating occurrence. What’s more, this luring and disturbing *view* of the stranger and of the unfamiliar can be interpreted in both senses and “directions”: observation and being observed, exposing ourselves and being judged by the others. This had provided a completely new area of research and source of inspiration and topics for artists in the second half of the nineteenth century, of which naturally the well-known examples are coming from the oeuvre of Manet, the Impressionists, Neo- and Post-Impressionist painters. Manet’s *Balcony* (1868–1869) re-interpreted Goya’s *Mayas on a balcony* (ca. 1800–1810) from a half century before, but instead of a simple re-visitation of the work or modernisation of its context and figures Manet focused on the insecurity of modern-day middle class while both watching and being watched by the others. This observation and mutual watching of each other can also be reconstructed by two works of the Neo-Impressionist Seurat, who (almost) literally juxtaposed the different social groups on his monumental *Bathers at Asnières* (1883–1884) and *A Sunday afternoon on the Île de la Grande Jatte* (1884–1886). The two pieces, of almost identical sizes complement each other: on the previous painting the exhausted young men are taking a bath in a less-developed area, while on the pendant image we see elegant representatives of the upper middle-class bourgeoisie strolling in the well-designed park. The two groups seem to face each other as the young men are looking to the right, through the river, while the entertaining and relaxing public on the island direct their gaze towards the left. Curiously, this novel experience of the nineteenth century of constant observation and being observed by the unknown stranger that had been thematised in the arts turns out to be not only a far-away historical subject matter. Just opening a quick parenthesis and fast-forward reference to the very near future: something very similar is what we are going to experience pretty soon with the mass and massive spread of drones in today’s megapolises. These will definitely change our everyday life, and not only with the comfortable services they can provide, including delivery of goods and transport of humans, but also in their threatening drawbacks of the possibility of constant observation. As Edwin Heathcote summarised in his article in the *Financial Times* about the changing aspects of cities at the dawn of the drone-period:

Perhaps the streets will be left to the poor while the wealthy occupy the upper levels or perhaps drones will simply remind us that not only are we being watched with every keystroke or phone scroll we make, but in every step we take in the privacy of our own homes (Heathcote, 2017: 20).

Coming back to the late nineteenth century however, the complex and continuously changing social network's disorientating effect was only heightened with the constantly modifying urban context — and this might be seen as a paradox side-effect of modernisation: the more the urban structure was clearly organised through the rationalisation of the cities and their centres, the more the inhabitants could have felt insecure and lost. Gustave Caillebotte's *Paris street, rainy day* (1877) anticipates, in a very subtle way the early twentieth century worries of living in the metropolis. The almost uncomfortably wide streets draw the viewer in the middle of the scene, among the uniformed figures, all having even the same type of umbrellas. This sense of being lost and unattached to one's own environment is one of the key experiences of urbanity that was further thematised in various avant-garde movements in the next decades. Following Sharon L. Hirsh's analyses, it is worth comparing Caillebotte's painting with Edvard Munch's *Evening on Karl Johan Street* (1892). As Hirsh argues, the very similar topic led to completely dissimilar interpretations: "Despite a shared *perspective*, each artist's *view* is decidedly different" (Hirsch, 2004: 63 — italics in the original). In the case of Caillebotte, the figures appearing in the painting are not (yet entirely) distorted by the new urban reality, they are individuals, still capable of interacting with each other, despite their isolated arrangement on the vast boulevard, their isolation highlighted even by the shelter-providing umbrella. Munch's painting however depicts faceless, unconnected figures, without possible interactions in the "evil city". On another note, Hirsh is right when affirming that Munch further developed the earlier nineteenth century interpretation of the "evil city" where it used to serve as the context for individual drama; in the Symbolists' view in general and in Munch's in particular, "the evil city deserved its reputation as the breeder of *mass* personality dysfunction: here, people don't go wrong; they lose their identities altogether" (Hirsch, 2004: 72–73 — italics in the original).

From this it becomes evident how, in the first half of the twentieth century, opposing interpretations of big city life and of the aesthetic analyses of urban experience were born. For example, the Expressionists depicted the alienating character of the metropolises as well as the anxiety many felt when living in the modern urban environment through the use of harsh and discordant colours, distorted views and strong-contoured elongated figures placed in hardly decipherable and disturbing spaces. The vertigo of the danger and the destructive threats of the city on both on individual and social level were commonly investigated subject matters in fine arts as well as in literature, including not

only fiction but also memoirs and diaries turned into literary pieces; as the well-known examples of these we can remember the works of Alfred Döblin, Christopher Isherwood and Nicolaus Sombart<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, with the spread of modernist ideas, and with the popularity of Art Deco products and Bauhaus design principles in art, architecture and industrial design the modern city from certain aspects had become an experimental playground and inspiring melting pot for new ideas. Modern(ist) symbols mutually inspired art, architecture and design, e.g. New York's skyscrapers were the point of departure for some of the chair designs of Abel Faigy and bookshelves by Paul T. Frankl around the 1930s — naturally satisfying the growing need for the new urban elite of celebrating and enjoying the modern cities' appearances not only outside, but also within their home, hence the external urban experience could continue in the interior too. The lure of the modern metropolis and the attraction of the new way of life developing in them continued also in the second half of the twentieth century, and largely contributed to the establishing of new art centres. The dominance of New York as a leading global art hub that since the 1950s–1960s partly replaced the position that Paris had had in the pre-WWII era is explainable not only by the obvious reason of growing financial importance of both the city and of the whole continent, but also because of the aesthetically inspiring city experience that New York provided to its inhabitants and immigrants.

After this brief historical glimpse quoting a few exciting earlier instances of the connection of the complex relationship of the city, urban experience and art, let's now turn our attention to some contemporary examples that can widen our collection of artists' approaches examining urbanity and how it can inspire the creation of new works. What we can notice first is that the interest of artists has become even wider, including such issues that previously we could not really find among the topics investigated through the creation of new pieces. When enquiring urbanity and its experience we do not only find the representation of the possible implicit or explicit clashes between the different layers of society like we saw in the late nineteenth century art, and they are not simply about the changing aspects of the modern metropolis and its consequences on the lifestyle as we could read the pieces from the classical avant-garde. Among the often-recurring contemporary issues that inspire artists we can list for example the social tensions between not only the wealthier and those in straitened financial circumstances, but also between the majority of inhabitants and the different ethnic minorities — even if they too had been living in the town since centuries. Apart from exploring the tensions regarding the changing homogeneity of the city, another broadly investigated area is

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<sup>3</sup> More on these authors, as well as on the question how the characteristic features of Berlin have become descriptive symbols of the city see an earlier text of mine: Somhegyi, 2012.

directed to the numerous drawbacks connected to the rapid urban development of the cities. Often almost exclusively driven by short-term financial gains, the modernisation projects in many cases fail to consider both the heritage value of the place and the real needs of the actual residents. As a consequence, the former inhabitants are also often moving, either by their own choice or are forcefully relocated. Therefore, modernisation and gentrification generate an intricate problem not only because in many cases they have questionable connections to certain financial interests, but also because the real — actual or even future — users' needs, necessities, demands and desires are scarcely taken into proper consideration. Some of the particularities of this tension between the vision of the decision-makers and the everyday life of the inhabitants was also described by Raffaele Milani in his recent book titled *L'arte della città* (The art of the city):

Politicians, grand managers and architects love the shocking monumentality, while, on the opposite side, the citizens try to activate a creative participation in order to humanise the play of this exterminated territorial *poiesis* with their projects of the social reconversion of empty spaces (Milani, 2015: 9 — italics in the original; in my translation from the Italian original).

We can also say that even with the best intentions of the planning specialists and decision-making entities, the actual users may have significantly different preferences. For example the lure of the derelict spaces and the attraction of the not-so-tidy neighbourhoods is a common phenomenon, though it still often surprises town-planners. Departing from Ossi Naukkarinen's observation, Max Rynnänen reminds us that despite the efforts of city planners of creating pleasing and harmonious environments with stainless appearance and perfect refinements, very often it is not what the average city-dwellers prefer: "We go for a beer to the shady side of the town and we enjoy jogging through an area filled with abandoned harbour houses"<sup>4</sup>.

Still another area, scrutinising of which we can frequently find in contemporary pieces is the question regarding the city as a political platform: what are the limits and possibilities of expressing political disagreement on the streets? Whose city is the city? Several public artworks explicitly interrogate the convoluted questions connected to the right to use the public space itself. When are demonstrations or occupations legitimate forms of resistance and what are the possible connecting points of these political happenings to art? What are the requirements of a public action to become an artwork? Many of these issues are comprehensively analysed in contemporary works in which the social and political standpoints are crucial in the better understanding of the works. In

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<sup>4</sup> The original paper by Ossi Naukkarinen (Naukkarinen, 1998: 26–37) I quote after Max Rynnänen (Rynnänen, 2018: 59).

the most inspiring art pieces however, the investigation of these questions do not result in “dry” pieces, i.e. where the intellectually (over)loaded conceptual content define or dominate the works, but the artists create works that are aesthetically just as thrilling as they fascinate us with the current political issue they stem from, analyse and provide a solution for.

As we can see on this variety of contemporary approaches of the analyses of urbanity and of urban experience the palette ranges from descriptive statements to politically more charged and socially more committed pieces. The experience of and inspiration from the city can thus lead to works that describe a subjective interpretation of certain features and aspects of urbanity, while others aiming at or urging for direct, actual interventions. Hence in the following I would like to quote some exciting examples to illustrate this broad range of approaches, in the aforementioned direction, i.e. starting from the visualisation of a subjective impression going towards pieces that are more explicitly loaded with political and social reflections.

For example, the Berlin-based Hungarian photographer Ádám Magyar has long been fascinated by the large, especially Asian, megapolises. His long research was aimed especially on the invention of not only new topics and approaches, but later also on new photographic techniques resulting in unusual appearances in order to describe his fascination and the experience of the city. The driving motivation is not simply the showing of the variety and the vast number of urban dwellers, but also to find an aesthetic way of creating new works that describe the randomness we all sense in urban contexts and in the endless fluctuation of metropolises. Especially in his series titled *Urban flow* we can observe the flow of average passers-by in an unexpected way: the particularly long, black and white photographs show people walking in the same direction in an indefinable environment of continuous horizontal lines. The curious appearance derives from the technique with which the photos were taken. The artist developed a slit-scan image recording, where the camera captures only a one-pixel-wide slit and places these one after the other — almost like a reversed scanner, where it is not the scanning recorder, but the subject itself that moves. When the photographer placed his apparatus on the streets of metropolises, including Tokyo, London, Hong Kong and New York, obviously passers-by walked in front of it from both directions, nevertheless, in the final piece it is not the direction of passing by the camera, but exclusively the time of passing by what matters. This also means that the non-moving elements in the background always provide the same information of light to the camera, hence the continuous parallel lines that make up the surreal space where the urban flow streams. The new technical solution thus allowed the artist to create a novel aesthetic vision of his urban experience of the unending succession and pouring of people in the metropolis. This is naturally not a classical snapshot of a crowd on the streets, not the simple capturing of time immortalising



and freezing one singular, actual moment, like in classical photography. There is more at stake here: the turning of time into space. The elongated images may include over three minutes of time. The unique flow of urban inhabitants who all head in the same direction can obviously be read as visual metaphor of (city)life through the direct representation of time, including its ceaseless character: the special and spatial representation of time could be endless. It is solely the artist's decision where and when to stop the scanning and thus the image-making process, in this way then including the human intervention in the mechanical reproduction of the urban flow. In the final work everyone appearing in the image is of equal rank and value, regardless of whether they are at the "beginning" or the "end" of the image — in other words, whether they can be seen on the right or the left side of it. It might be read from the point of view of how the city's standardising power affects everyone. As if by losing the different directions of walking, the individual would also be lost, and a general course of life would emerge from the homogeneity of the walking crowd. Thus the artist is establishing poetic and at the same time philosophical rendering of his urban experience of the flowing of city crowds<sup>5</sup>.

One of the aforementioned questions that we can often find examined among contemporary works are investigated in a series of photographs that at first sight seem completely opposite to the previous pieces: the empty city. In *Ádám Magyar's* works the non-human elements of the city practically do not appear in a recognisable way, while the German photographer *Tor Seidel* is documenting the breath-taking urban development of Dubai and the United Arab Emirates, however, most of his images completely lack the human figures, again a feature that can be surprising because the series nevertheless engages to contribute to our experiencing and understanding of the city itself<sup>6</sup>. His departure point is therefore to document the transition of the cities, or, better to say: the momentary in-between stage from the not-yet existing to the already functioning. This is why, since his arrival in the United Arab Emirates a few years ago he took photos both presenting and elaborating the view of natural and artificial environment, of the genuine landscapes and of the high-rise cityscapes. In his photographs we can see traditional locations and still-deserted areas, rapidly extending construction sites, partly-finished though promising projects as well as already functioning ultramodern districts of the booming cities. The high-paced level of the construction and urban development in the United Arab Emirates is renowned on a global scale, and the impressive examples of contemporary architecture are attracting amateur

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<sup>5</sup> See images of this and other series on the website of the artist: <http://www.magyaradam.com> (18.11.2018); further examination of his work for example in the artist's catalogue: Somhegyi, 2011, as well as in the article Somhegyi, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> See images on the artist's website: <https://www.torseidel.de> (18.11.2018); as well as in the book: Seidel, 2014.

and semi-professional image-takers to capture the breath-taking buildings in quick and “instagrammable” ways. Despite this however, Tor Seidel is more interested in how to visually grab the essence of the continuously transforming and constantly evolving city. His intention is thus to capture the basic experience of the residents of Dubai — the local Emiratis as well as of the numerous expats living in the city — i.e. that sense of continuous evolving of the city.

In Dubai, most of the urban expansion is happening in the previously deserted (literally desert) areas. In other countries however, the growth of the city — whatever spectacular the new developments may look at the end — is proceeding among significantly more conflicts, because very often for the sake of “modernisation” entire historical areas are sacrificed. The districts that are thus erased are not unused, abandoned or uninhabited areas, but active neighbourhoods, often with decades or even centuries-long local history, established customs and complex social networks. Through the modernisation and gentrification — often driven by real estate speculation — these structures are harmed or completely abolished, and the people who are forced to move are unlikely to easily reconstruct their regular urban environment that they used to have. These are again such issues that occur very often in contemporary artists’ work from a global range, where the art piece thus becomes an aesthetic investigation of these socio-political questions and sometimes even a manifesto against such decisions. An interesting example for this could be the Kurdish artist Halil Altındere’s video work titled *Wonderland* (2013), examining the radical changes in Istanbul’s Sulukule district<sup>7</sup>. The area used to be for more than six centuries the home of the Roma population of the megapolis, and that was one of the neighbourhoods to be threatened by demolition, especially after the Law No. 5366 on “Conservation by Renovation and Use by Revitalization of the Deteriorated Historical and Cultural Immovable Property” came to force in December 2005. A few years later not only the actual demolition has started, but further areas started to face the same fate<sup>8</sup> (Amado, 2013: 321). In Halil Altındere’s approx. 8-minute video we see the inhabitants of the district protesting against the demolition in word and act, dancing and singing. Several layers of reading and segments of culture are fascinatingly combined in the work: the Kurdish artist’s reading of the hip-hop, rap and Roma cultures, placed in the urban reality of a multi-ethnic global metropolis with several millennia of history. The whole world appearing in the video is at the same time harshly real and surreally dreamlike, for example in the narration some of the protagonists get shot by the police though they still continue their performance. In this way Halil Altındere captivately manages to analyse questions

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<sup>7</sup> See the work — followed by a conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist — on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHZUOTxkBDQ> (18.11.2018).

<sup>8</sup> Further on the work, with regards to its analysing of the questions of ethnicity see also: Somhegyi, 2016.

related to the inhabitants' right to the city, to the issues of modernisation and gentrification vs. maintaining the original neighbourhoods and to the hazards of dissolving the accustomed urban and social patterns.

The worries, what's more, traumas connected to the rapid modernisation of the traditional urban environment are subjects that inspire numerous Chinese artists too. It is interesting to see that despite the several thousands of kilometres and dissimilar historical contexts, the basic preoccupation of the artists — and naturally of the everyday urban dwellers whose problems the artists thematise through their creative work — are very similar, let it be in Turkey or China. From this latter country, let's quote the work of Chen Shaoxiong, who through a series of curiously staged photographs gave a both humorous and critical answer to the issues connected to the high-paced modernisation of towns. In his series simply titled *Street* from 1997–1998 the artist created physical collages or photomontages by photographing everyday scenes, citizens, vehicles, pedestrians, urban signs etc. in the city, then turning them into small cardboard cut-outs<sup>9</sup>. These mini-scenes or “stages”, re-arranged from the singular elements, were then photographed in front of the background of the actual city, thus formulating an intertwined relationship between the different levels of reality and of the work of art: these cityscapes are not “real”, in the sense that they do not depict an actual moment or snapshot from the life of the city, but they are not entirely fictional either, because the subjects do come from the city itself. Adding to this, the artist's hands also appear on the photo — while holding the small stage with the cardboard cut-outs in between the camera and modern city's skyline as background for the maquette — that can be interpreted as the highlighting of the composed, staged and thus also ephemeral feature of the views: the scenes can be anywhere, the backgrounds can change and the traditional reference points are fading. In this way Chen Shaoxiong reminds us that the rapid modernisation can also easily lead both to the homogenisation of the cities and to the emotional and intellectual disconnection of its inhabitants to their own environment. We might not recognise our own hometown even without leaving it. As the artist stated:

Although I am a resident of Guangzhou, I still have a tourist mentality towards this city. Not just because this city will outlive me, but faced with the daily changes, I often have the feeling of being elsewhere. [...] I feel that the speed at which I photograph the streets of Guangzhou will never catch up with the speed at which the streets of Guangzhou are changing (Jiehong, 2015: 46).

In this way Chen Shaoxiong's process of photographing the city is not simply a documentary act, but a certain mode of describing his everyday experience

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<sup>9</sup> See works from this series on the artist's website: <http://www.chenshaoxiong.net/?p=380> (18.11.2018).

of its mutability. The threat he points at is that with this radical change the city might not have features to be remembered by, and despite the desire of creating an attachment to it, the alienating character will become stronger.

Based on this we can notice that in the last two examples, both Halil Altındere and Chen Shaoxiong are worried of the harm to the qualities of the place and/or the complete disappearance of it; the “place” in the sense of meaningful urban spaces. As Maria Korusiewicz demonstrated, this “place” is a definite element in the urban reality that consists of the natural and built environment, the inhabitants and the cultural-historical element or *genius loci*:

Perceived phenomenologically as a lived and experienced indivisible whole, they determine place distinctiveness and the quality of place attachment and all three should be approached with care and respects [...] Aesthetic engagement directed toward a long process of (re)constructing a local sense of a given place-to-be requires implementation of practices and perceptions investing it with meaning, addressing also its heritage and tradition — meaning both the strategies of aesthetic domestication, and of estrangement or exoticisation (Korusiewicz, 2015: 404–405).

Through the rapid urban transformation, the forced changing of living environment for entire neighbourhoods, and through the dissolution of established social and cultural urban patterns “place” in the above sense is harmed. Artists focusing on these issues not only document these changes, but through their works attempt to remind us of the dangerous consequences of these tendencies on the urban life and social structures.

As we could see from the above instances of contemporary artists’ work focusing on the experience of and inspiration from the city, the arch of our examples ranged from the description of sensing a particular urban feature to arrive to the socially and politically more loaded and critical pieces of art that engage with various aspects and modes of experiencing the city. Just like Stephen Willats suggested in his manifesto quoted at the beginning of this essay, urbanity shall be analysed with connection to multiple senses, as an all-around experience. We can completely agree with him regarding the importance of the complex sensing and discovering of the city when trying to create a sort of attachment to it, a sense of belonging that strengthens not only our experience of the city but also our existence in it. Apart from this however, Willats also emphasised the focusing on actual problems, threats and difficulties of urbanity, and to address them through artistic practices and even social projects. Through these couple of examples above, deriving from different parts of the world and analysing various urban realities we have seen how artists turned certain aspects of their experience of the city into aesthetic analyses of urbanity and into critical investigation and artistic practices of numerous issues connected to contemporary city life. These works and oeuvres can help us understand

that the discovery of urban qualities is crucial for our (well-)being in the city. Willats' approach is more advisable today than ever, especially now when — as the contemporary Chinese artist Chen Shaoxiong reminds us — despite all our efforts to know our own city better and our aims of recognising its urban qualities, due to the almost uncontrollable modernisation it can easily happen that there will not remain anything anymore to be discovered.

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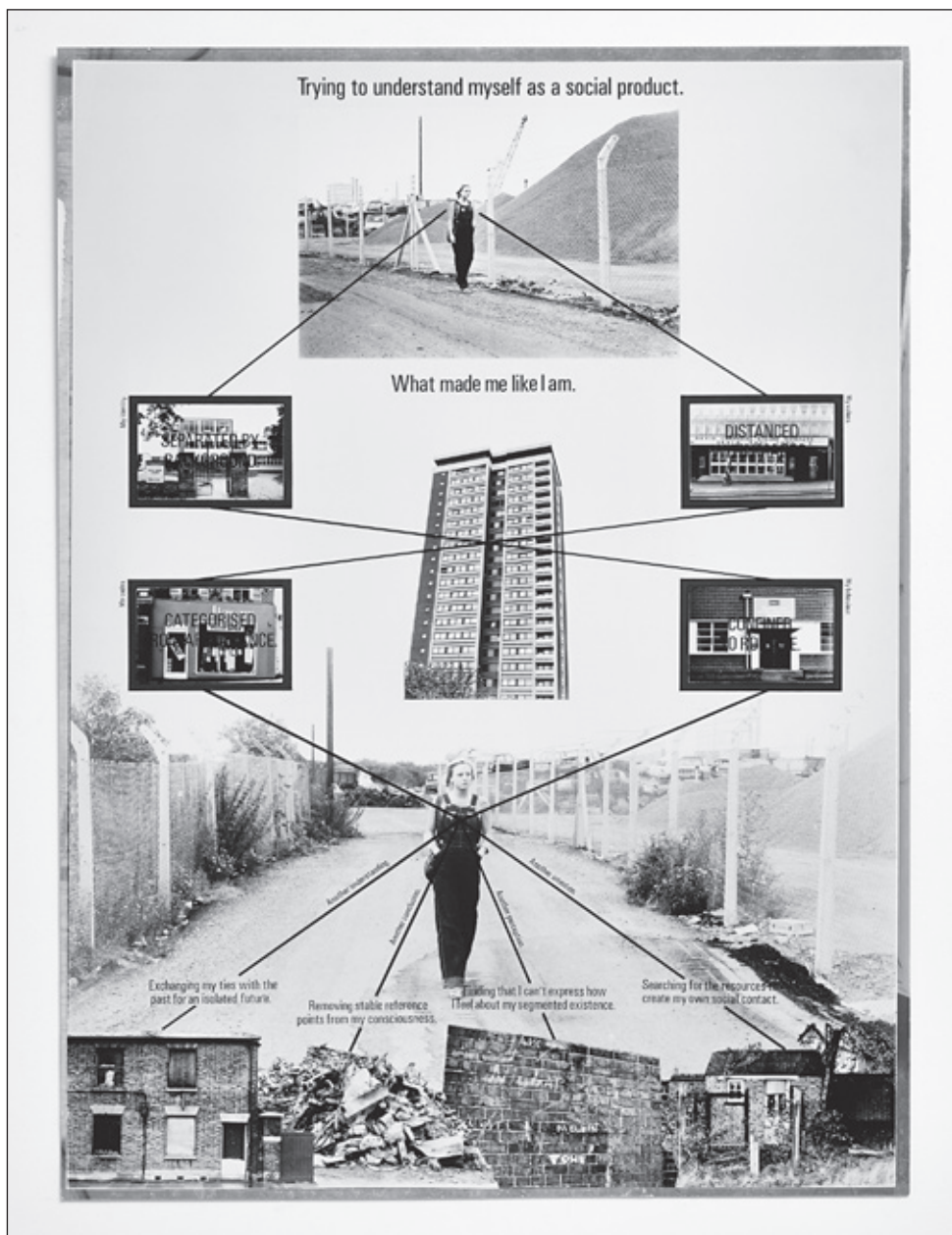
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1. Ádám Magyar: *Urban flow 1807* (New York, 2015), pigment print, 60 x 170 cm



2. Tor Seidel: *The camera*, 2015, 135 x 170 cm  
Courtesy the artist



3. Stephen Willats: *What Made Me Like I Am*, 1978, Photographic print on aluminium  
108.5 x 80 cm, 42 3/4 x 31 1/2 in

© Stephen Willats

Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London/Venice

