

VEIT STRATMANN

A PROPOSAL FOR SANKT GEORGEN, 2020



In the summer of 2020, at the invitation of the Global Forest Art Centre, I spent a month in Sankt Georgen in the Black Forest as an artist-in-residence. This invitation was linked to a proposal to analyse Sankt Georgen in a way similar to the one that made possible works like *A Hill*, *L'Aquila-Empty City* and *Riba Cantu-Addis Ababa*. Beyond that, the proposal was to conceive a work that could be incorporated the public space of Sankt Georgen.

While strolling through Sankt Georgen I understood very quickly that I was stuck in a dilemma: the starting point of the afore-mentioned works was the sudden dissolution of a system, the violent and instantaneous rupture of a developmental process. And this rupture could be experienced in a clearly defined geographical location.

The context of Sankt Georgen, by contrast, forms a long-lasting process that is still not finished - an economical decline as the result of an increasing obsolescence of industrial products made in Sankt Georgen. This process does not manifest itself at a single defining moment but rather stems from a chronologically erratic string of events appearing at different geographic locations scattered all over the urban space. The end of this process is still unforeseeable and its final amplitude as well as its influence on the geography, demography and cultural development of the town is not assessable.



Due to the fact that I can not grasp the process of decline in Sankt Georgen in its full amplitude and diversity, I can not build my project for Sankt Georgen on a global approach. Thus already during the exploratory phase I had to concentrate on partial and specific aspects of the process of decline. Many of those partial aspects were conveyed to me as oral or written narratives. Most of the time those narratives dealt with different presentations of the same series of events or with different evaluations of the same chronological progression. The current state of things was subject to diverging interpretations as well. The differences in the narratives,

interpretations and evaluations were determined by the social status or the generational affiliation of the narrators and the duration of a person's stay in Sankt Georgen. Since I did not dispose of any criteria to evaluate these narratives, I was ultimately unable to include them in my work. I could only refer to phenomena that could be objectively determined - by anyone including myself - without prior knowledge. In order for these phenomena to be tangible and to be shared or communicated in their entirety, they had to have a stable material form that could be perceived by everyone at any time without any effort.



The most visible of these material aspects - and the only one I was able to share with other people - was the fact that the closure of a great number of industrial firms in Sankt Georgen triggered the closure of dependent businesses, especially in the retail trade - and thus lead to a remarkable vacancy of business premises, especially of shops, in the urban space. Due to the cessation of their economical activity and to their physical closure, the premises intended as shops not only loose their economic role, they also loose their status in the social and spatial structure of the town. Although they are de facto private spaces, they cannot be used as such, or only with great difficulty, since the structure of the spaces is not suitable for

this purpose. At the same time, they do not belong to public space and they no longer serve the role of a private space accessible to the public.



All that remains of the store spaces are their material shells, emptied and detached from any context. As when they were in use, these emptied shells can be seen from public space and invite one to look at them, but there is no longer any reason to do so. They continue to visually open up to public space, although they exclude it. Their doors also continue to suggest their accessibility, even if the shells are no longer accessible. Formally, they remain spaces that link the public and the private realm, although this link has been severed. In this way, these spaces become holes in the meaningful coherence of the town. They become pauses, absences, non-territories, non-spaces. Since they have also fallen out of the unstable processes and rhythms of public and private life, they become places with no passage of time, without change. They become places of stable non-time.

Due to the number of these non-spaces in relation to the size of the town, they cannot go unnoticed in Sankt Georgen. The urban space is so replete with these non-spaces that their visibility cannot be diminished by

competing visual impressions. Due to their omnipresence, the different individual non-places stand out, reinforce each other and form a network, a distinctive fabric. This texture contaminates the fabric of the town and threatens to dissolve the urban space in its role as the structure that separates the public and the private sphere and, at the same time, organises their intertwining.



I visited Sankt Georgen as an artist. Therefore I assume that it is not my job to formulate suggestions for the solution of problems outside the realm of art. Any such attempt would undermine the artistic and ethical validity of my action and art would disappear. My task can only be to formulate questions in the most appropriate and intellectualised *form* possible or to open up space for debate.

Since art cannot offer a solution to non-artistic problems, I also assumed during my explorations in Sankt Georgen that it cannot stabilise an unstable situation nor prevent structural dissolution. Art cannot replace anything that is missing or absent. It cannot fill a void. Firstly, because there is no designated space for a newly created work of art. Every work of art

has to invent its own space and thus its specific place in the world. Secondly, if the presence of a work of art in a given place is only justified by the fact that it fills up space, it becomes a simple three-dimensional object with no particular status.



Art cannot replace anything either. It can not replace the absence of an object or a function. It can not replace the absence of an activity associated with a function and it cannot replace the temporality of life associated with this activity. Of course, an artistic gesture can contain its own temporality. It can also go out of style and become invisible. And it can of course be destroyed. However, it can never be subjected to the arc of suspense leading to an expiration date or an obsolescence and it cannot create or structure any extra-artistic timeline.

In this context, developing an artistic gesture for Sankt Georgen cannot intend to fill the non-spaces in Sankt Georgen or to dissolve their non-time. It cannot oppose the dissolution of urban space. It can only be about turning the problem around and using the dissolution of urban space as the core element of a plastic form. Thus I have to place my artistic gesture

in or at each interstice between the private and the public spheres that dissolves the urban space. Every non-space must itself become a plastic form. And the urban space must be interspersed with these forms. At the same time, these forms must be structured to avoid representing individual, unique artistic gestures so that they are linked to one another and that each gesture evokes memories of the other gestures, forming a network. They have to become a structure that is an inseparable part, both spatially and temporally, of the town's fabric.



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The left half of the facade of every vacant shop in the urban area of Sankt Georgen is covered with a wall made of plasterboard. Plasterboard is used because it does not have a clear status. Its use can be permanent or temporary. Plasterboard walls convey no information other than that they were erected and that their installation was simple, quick, inexpensive and unspectacular. Walls made of plasterboard can separate rooms and they

are material boundaries of noticeable hardness. At the same time, they withstand very little physical impact. And there is no reason to look at them for their own sake. They are empty surfaces, pure expediency. Plasterboard walls are of no importance. They never refer to themselves, only to their context.



At the same time, the act of covering part of a facade with plasterboard represents a deliberate act. And the fact that this effort has been made confers a certain importance to its presence. But covering a part of a facade with plasterboard is also functional: real walls obstruct the left half of facades which, because of their transparent windows, allow a view of their interiors. This functionality also gives importance to the plasterboard walls. Yet the walls do not provide any information about the reason they were erected and why they obstruct half of the facades of empty shops.

The viewer's gaze glides across a surface of the plaster board wall from left to right in accordance with the reading reflex induced by the Latin script. If a passer-by is willing to take time to look at the *half-covered* store fronts, his or her gaze will sweep over the smooth, empty surface of the left half of the facade and slide through the transparency of the uncovered right half

into the shop which has been stripped of its social and economic role. Since the shop is empty and devoid of its role, the view through the transparent right half of the facade offers no information why the effort was made to cover the left side of the facade nor why, through this effort, any importance was accorded to this empty or purposeless room, nor one is invited to look at them.



A list of the facades to be covered is established. If further vacancies occur, they will be added to this list and the facades concerned will be covered accordingly. If, on the other hand, a shop is repurposed permanently as a private space and this is architecturally visible or if it is used for a new economic, social or political use, i.e. "It's door is open", the plasterboard half-facade is removed.





