Aesthetics and Anthropology of Megacities

A New Field of Art Historical Research

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I.

- 1 One of Heinz von Foerster's famous axioms states that the environment which we perceive is nothing but our invention (fig. 1.). When we approach the phenomenon of the Mexican megalopolis, this seems to be true, because it is hard to understand how about 20 million inhabitants, almost the same number as the whole Australian population, lives together in anything still called a "city." The spatial construction of Mexico City appears from aerial views as an endless accumulation of settlements, fragmented at the mountains, which are the topographical borders.

Fig. 1. Aerial view of Mexico City; *Citamblers*, p.88.

- 2 The Serbian urban thinker Bogdan Bogdanovic once asked whether Troy and Tokyo can both be subsumed under the category of “cities,” and in this sense, we can question whether Mexico City is just another configuration of enduring urban culture or a new mutation which deserves terminological revisions.
- 3 Since Jean Gottman’s influential study in the 1960s on the US-American “megapolis” between Boston and Washington, urban studies have been mainly monopolized by geography, sociology, and economics, sometimes with the practical aim of implanting modernization programs in “Third World” megalopolises.
- 4 However, our discipline, art history, has long claimed a role in urban analysis, since *Stadtbaukunst*, the art of planning and constructing cities, was introduced in the art historical canon in the early twentieth century. Art historical approaches to understand urban cultures initially focused on “artistic” matters, reducing the essence of the city to spectacular planning concepts and outstanding buildings.
- 5 Recently, in the intellectual context of redefining art history as *Bildwissenschaft*, the science of the image, visual urban analysis has become more complex. Not only the cultural “highlights” merit academic interest, but also the new—even banal and ugly—forms of urban structures.
- 6 Art historical studies can complement geographical, social, and economic studies of contemporary megacities, because visual facts and fictions are significant resources for understanding the complex phenomenon of the city. They offer insights and the possibilities of interpretation—for instance, whether Mexico City, can still be defined as a city. What we call image science, particularly the science of urban images, which is the main focus of my research, is based on art historical methods, such as formal aesthetic analysis, iconography, and social history. However, this concept of research requires a wider methodological spectrum, and has to be oriented towards interdisciplinary thinking.

- 7 Visual constructions—of the city itself as well as photographs of it, or paintings and digital representations—serve as sources for complex interpretations of current megalopolitan cultures. Mathematical parameters, from cybernetics or chaos theory, and even biological theory can open new insights into the aesthetics and anthropology of such huge agglomerations as Mexico City.
- 8 Within the intellectual context of “art and anthropology,” we focus on the *anthropos*, the human being and his/her capacity for spatial imaginations and organization. Concretely, we ask how the human habitat, under the extreme conditions of the megalopolis, generates specific images and imaginaries which construct the inhabitants’ realities and also attract artists and their international public. Thus, anthropology and art may serve as two complementary approaches to cultural interpretation of the megacities phenomenon.

Fig. 2. Satellite photograph of Mexico City; *Citamblers*, p.4.

II.

- 9 In order to understand the art historical approach to the aesthetics of the megalopolis it is useful to revise and even discard some of the existing models of interpretation.
- 10 One of them is Nestor García Canclini’s research on Mexico City. He is an urban anthropologist who analyzes social structures, political conditions, and economic aspects of everyday life in the megalopolis, but he neglects almost completely the visual aspects of urban structures. By contrast, I think that urban images and imaginations stimulate collective feed back mechanisms, particularly those images that generate spatial identification. Canclini’s widely published work represents conventional “blind” anthropology, in which the aesthetic dimensions of territoriality and social organization do not matter.

- 11 A different approach to megalopolitan visual cultures was presented during the contemporary art show Documenta 11 in Kassel, in 2002. The Colombian sociologist Armando Silva took advantage of a specific, and in my opinion critical, situation of contemporary art. Given the mediatic shade of massive image distribution on television and the Internet, it seems that contemporary art tries to recover its lost discursive importance by dealing with topics of social importance. For example, a considerable part of recent fine art productions deals with conflicting urban cultures. The artistic reflection of an ongoing debate about the future of the megacities, takes “art” out of its discursive exile in galleries, contemporary art museums, and magazines.
- 12 That is why the Documenta directors published Silva’s sociological and anthropological research on “urban cultures in Latin America and Spain, seen from its social imaginaries” in the publication recording of an art show. One mode of understanding visual practices in the cities and their collective mental effects is the analysis of popular picture postcards with urban themes. However, Silva’s research lacks basic art historical methodology, especially the critical analysis of visual sources. No information is given about how the images were conceived, produced, distributed, and received. He offered no interpretation about the complex processes of visual communication.
- 13 Like Canclini, the urban anthropologist, Silva and his research team do not explore the aesthetic dimension of megalopolitan cultures, and thus they cannot show whether the production of visual stereotypes (on widely circulating postcards) really determines how the inhabitants form a collective virtual identification with the city. Nor do these social scientists tackle the possible mental compensatory function that which shiny photographs on postcards may have, in contrast to the degenerated urban spaces that people actually see.
- 14 Unlike their methods of these scholars, an urban anthropology oriented towards contemporary art production, can reveal the mechanisms and effects of visual communication by and in urban spaces. What made the situation even worse Furthermore, although the publication was meant to serve as an intellectual “platform” of the Documenta exhibition, but it is written in neo-existentialist and post-Freudian phraseology. It only reinforces clichés about Latin American megacities. For example, the article on “The Full, Imagined, and Invisible Center of Mexico City” states that “this city produces other types of referents, those of human contact, socialities between strangers or equals, and it forms something close to an unspoken identity, one that is simply exerted with the force of a collective sensitivity.” Without doubt, this can be said about almost every city in all epochs and cultures of the world, but it does not help us to understand the specific function of urban images and imaginations in the Mexican megalopolis at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Fig. 3. Facets of every day life in Mexico City; *Citamblers*, p.10.

- 15 This example shows that the creative, chaotic, non-linear visual potential of the city sometimes is more striking than its interpretation, especially when anthropological and sociological research lacks essential art historical support.
- 16 In another discursive context we find similar problems. Rem Koolhaas, a Dutch architect with impressive discursive power at world scale the international level, also discovered the “chaos” of the “Third World” megalopolis as a striking topic. With his Harvard students of architecture he explored extreme but paradigmatic urban case studies, those of the Pearl River Delta in China, and of Lagos in Nigeria. No doubt these texts about megalopolitan “mutations” reveal interesting facts about changing concepts of habitat, both in an emerging economic world power such as China, and in a postcolonial oil state such as Nigeria. Urban anthropologists may find rich visual material in Koolhaas’s publications. But if we look closer, and compare his theses with other, less spectacular types of urban research, we discover that Koolhaas’s editorial style, mainly designed by Bruce Mau, filters and even deflects the process of anthropological learning. The reason is that the presentation of his ideas is too “chic.” Even worse, Koolhaas uses these cases to project his visions, without closely studying the empirical details of the urban spaces in question.
- 17 Nevertheless, Koolhaas has generated an interesting alternative to Eurocentric urban discourse, and his marketing of his thoughts has had a positive side effect for urban visual anthropology. It is unquestionably interesting to learn how cities grow and develop with hardly any planning instruments and strategies, and how this determines new ways of urban life in the early twenty-first century.
- 18 New aesthetic urban configurations may correspond to anarchic creativity in the inhabitants’ daily life. Yet all too easily, the fascination of urban chaos blots out the social misery of the majority of the poor, the slum dwellers in Lagos or the homeless, ambulatory construction workers in the new Chinese megacities. There, social history approaches the “planet of slums,” as Mike Davis put it. If we understand the difference

between reality and intellectual constructs, we can provide a reality check when faced with the aesthetic fascination of urban chaos as a new definition of beauty.

- 19 Again, the visual phenomena seem to be more striking than their interpretation. Coping with this deficit in perspective is precisely the task of a research concept that combines anthropological and aesthetic inquiry. We must aim for something beyond the marketing imperatives of art shows or architectural practice.

III.

- 20 We may still wonder how urban anthropology and aesthetics can generate a productive methodological synergy. In this third and last part of my article, I will briefly mention a conceptual framework for understanding the usefulness of urban photography in two different projects about the visual culture of the Mexican megalopolis. They are called *ABCDF* and *Citamblers*.
- 21 Photographic images and imaginations of the contemporary urban habitat, from the “Google Earth” aesthetics down to fragmented micro perceptions of streets and houses, are abundant visual sources for representing and understanding the culture of megacities. Art historical research on the visual patterns, strategies, and impacts—that is, the style, iconography, and history of reception—of these photographs gives useful insights into globalized urban production in the early twenty-first century. Beyond the analytical scope of economic and sociological studies, expressed with words and statistics, photographic images may focus clearly how social segregation, acculturation processes, and economic imperatives configure contemporary cityscapes. They allow a deeper understanding of the visual feedback mechanisms in the social organization of the masses in urban agglomerations.
- 22 This topic of art historical research on megacities impinges on the terrain of anthropology. In order to find out how the configuration of urban territories determines the collective spatial conscience, and vice versa, art historians must consult anthropologists. Both should dare to leave their secure methodological “fortresses” and encourage creative interdisciplinary work.
- 23 There is no doubt, for instance, that the anthropological debates on territoriality enrich art historical thinking on the city as an aesthetic object. This example of a conceptual and terminological cross over gives a new dimension to aesthetic analysis of city culture, because it explains its results in the wider frame of understanding human civilization—and as we may see in the case of megacities, also its degeneration.

Fig. 4. Slums in Mexico City; *Citamblers*, p.181.

- 24 However, in this article I cannot go deeply into urban anthropological debates, but from my position as an art historian, I can outline some ways in which the morphology of the megalopolis and its visual representation in artistic photography can be more fully interpreted. This requires “mutual borrowings” between the two disciplines, art history and anthropology. To give an example: What anthropologists probably may not consider is a figure of thought provided by Adorno, namely that the decomposition of traditional aesthetic forms—and I would add urban forms—generates new, interesting aesthetic configurations which describe the negative dialectics of the modernization process. The increasing decomposition of traditional urban substance is a concern not only of art historians dedicated to historic preservation. It is also a topic of aesthetic research.
- 25 Can the new urban self-referential morphologies of agglomeration and sprawl be understood as visual celebrations of decomposition, as a logic of systemic processes similar to the art works of John Cage or the Fluxus movement? Does current non- or post-European urban development reveal pluralistic alternatives to traditional European city culture, globally monopolized and exported to the “colonies” over the centuries?
- 26 Probably, contemporary megalopolitan photography is able to capture most clearly these urban mutations and their controversial evaluation. The enormous variety of visual constructions in photography up to extreme digital manipulation and abstraction of cityscapes reflects the social and cultural organization of the globalized mega citizen. This permanently expanded visual archive can be an important source for anthropological inquiry.
- 27 In addition, the interpretation of spatial distinction of urban space by social forces and cultural processes requires anthropological thinking, particularly about the importance of images for human existence. This is true of both existing structures and their visual representation in photography. Recent research has pointed out that the

“virtuality” of neuronal image production is a driving force for human behavior. The virtual movement generated by visual perception of megalopolitan cityscapes and details seems to be a basic human condition. Spatial images and imaginations orient and direct urban inhabitants, and therefore they serve as an excellent object of art historical and anthropological research.

- 28 One of the most prominent collections of megalopolitan photography, which allows offers contrasting insights into Mexico City inat the early twenty-first century, was the exhibition and coffee table book *ABCDF*. I want to concentrate on the book rather than the exhibition with its specific problems of presentation.

Fig. 5. Painting on Volkswagen taxi; *ABCDF*, p.598.

- 29 The book *ABCDF* is subtitled “A Graphic Dictionary of Mexico City.” The publisher issued 15,000 copies of this—sold-out—book that weighs several kilograms. It contains about two thousand images which were selected from a pool of twenty-three thousand. These very numbers indicate that the book’s opulence is meant to reflect the gigantic dimensions of the city itself.
- 30 Although the alphabetical arrangement of the visual dictionary presumably generates a logical order, the entries only present diverse facets of the megalopolis. That is understandable, given the abundant autopoietic image production in Mexico City.
- 31 However, there was almost no effort made to include recent scholarly research about the city. Only a few quotations from famous writers and journalists interrupt the visual discourse of the book, set fashionably in Bruce Mau/Rem Koolhaas-style typography. So the central element of *ABCDF* is a flood of photographs. This raises the question of the intended audience. It appears that the book was meant for an audience trained by zapping television, an audience with little interest in profound written analysis of this and other socio-cultural phenomena.

- 32 Some brief examples may show how the photographs could serve as rich resources for aesthetic and anthropological research.
- 33 The entry “CABIN” presents evidence of a violent city decomposed into gated communities. The pictures may stimulate re-thinking about the complex processes that govern people’s movement to new locations in the sprawling, seemingly endless megacity. The striking picture of the current mania for surveillance in every world city stimulates critical reflection, but without that serious reflection, the photograph may only be a curiosity rather than a provocative image.
- 34 This is a central problem inherent in the kind of visual anthropology proposed by the ABCDF authors. Another entry, “MAGNA SIN,” shows a small amateur painting on the tap of the gas-filling installation of a car. It represents in ex-voto style the modernized urban landscape, but just as an eye-catcher, not as a mind-catcher. That is to say, readers can investigate its potential only if they have visual and intellectual training in popular iconography. This moving image, painted on a permanently circulating Volkswagen taxi, transported around the whole city, would offer material for an interpretation of mental urban stereotypes and the visual feedback mechanisms of the population.
- 35 While art historians can contribute specific knowledge about visual representation of cityscapes, popular religious painting, and so on, anthropologists can offer patterns of understanding other things, such as the fictional emblematic and almost ritual character of this small image in the process of constructing collective identities in the huge cities of developing countries today. Whatever you call this methodology—call it mutual borrowings, synergies, or crossovers—it shows the potential of a science of images oriented toward visual anthropology.
- 36 To analyze visual constructions of and in cityscapes, which are determined by contemporary aesthetic schemes and fictional filters, is a worthy transdisciplinary academic task. It examines the epistemological potential of even the most fragmented, decontextualized, neo-surrealist, or neo-situationist image production. I therefore consider the aesthetics and anthropology of megacities as a new field of art historical research, capable of establishing an intense dialogue with the producers and distributors of current urban photography.
- 37 One last example will show how this collaboration works. *Citamblers: The Incidence of the Remarkable: A Guide to the Marvels of Mexico City* was an artistic and academic project which presented an alternative to the flattening image-flooding of ABCDF. In *Citamblers*, anthropological thinking was closely interwoven with experimental strategies.

Fig. 6. Perception of the megacity; *Citamblers*, p.173.

- 38 Readers are invited to revise the circulating and mutating imaginaries of the megalopolis, which indicate unexpected information about the organization of habitat under extreme conditions. These conditions include over-population, rigid segregation, and environmental self-destruction. Unlike *ABCDF*'s dictionary, *Citamblers* is an alternative "travel guide" where every topic can be physically proven, whether it is the aesthetic fascination inherent in the decay of buildings, or the visual frightfulness of social and spatial organization. Similar to the situationist movement of the 1960s, *Citamblers* inspires new forms of urban observation. It reveals a surprising aesthetic potential of the megacity where its members live and work.
- 39 But *Citamblers* is not only an aesthetic exercise, but also an academic revision. An essay on "Citambulation. Distinguish, Understand, and Exploit the Imaginaries of the Megacity of Mexico" allows meaning to be constructed even where the absurd supposedly predominates. Beyond the aesthetic thrill of ugly, decomposed, or even brutal images and imaginations, *Citamblers* reveals striking documents for a new visual anthropology of the megalopolis. These documents uncover various psychological and social functions of the permanently mutating cityscapes. The documents also explain the alternative, often unplanned organization of urban space as a form of collective creativity. These are documents that stimulate sensorial response mechanisms for both inhabitants and visitors.
- 40 Via aesthetic manipulation, expressed in the series of focused and zoomed photographs of sites, the *Citamblers* profile Mexico City as a permanent anthropological experiment. It is a place where 20 million inhabitants are able to re-codify their visual surroundings. That is how to avoid petrification of the "bestselling" negative clichés of the megalopolis.
- 41 I want to stress the importance of a critical visual anthropology that examines the supposedly chaotic visual construction of the megacity as a source of collective

creativity. Art historians can contribute to megalopolitan visual anthropology using their established methods that show how and why images move collective minds.

- 42 If we define in anthropological terms the complex construction and plural perceptions of urban images as a basic function of the human being, we should be aware that the environment that we perceive is only our invention. Visual fiction is a deep sourcevaluable resource for a complex understanding of the human habitat. Art historians understand that this but sociologists and economic researchers are not trained to do so. I find the megalopolis to be better defined by its controversial collective imaginaries than by apparently hard facts such as population statistics or economic diagrams. Perhaps a renewed art history can contribute unexpected and refreshing insights to routine urban planning, to the World Bank, and to geographers' debates about the megalopolis.

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RÉSUMÉS

This paper deals with the aesthetic and anthropological research on the image of the megacities in the early 21st century, focusing on the case of Mexico City. Since art history has been revised and developed towards a “science of the image” —Bildwissenschaft in German—, objects and methods of research have been widely extended, so that even a topic like “megacities”, formerly monopolized by sociology, geography and economical studies, can be accepted as a contribution to our discipline.

Aesthetic research on megacities is based on traditional art historical methods, formal analysis, iconography, and social history. However, to explore more deeply the images and imaginations of the contemporary megalopolis, we should include anthropological research strategies, concretely in order understand visual feed back mechanisms in social organization of accumulated masses in the urban agglomeration. Although urban anthropology has presented interesting thoughts on territoriality and social organization, it still lacks the exploration of the specific visual constructions which define the megacity’s habitat.

Therefore, in my paper I propose cross over research strategies between aesthetic and anthropological understanding of the megacities phenomena. A case study of Mexico City, populated at present with about 20 millions of habitants, may allow to revise mutual borrowings, debates and misunderstandings between the two disciplines, concretely how anthropological categories such as “territoriality” enrich art historical thinking on the city as an aesthetic object. The enormous variety of urban imagineries, from aerial views to fragmented perception of streets and houses, even their cultural codifications has been recently presented in the photographic exhibition ABCDF and other art exhibitions. This visual material which represents aleatory and non planned urban configurations can serve as an object of interdisciplinary, art historical and anthropological research, where even the images of popular megalopolitan cultures serve as material for contemporary artistic installations — a clear case of how objects pass from one “regime of value” to another.

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Keywords : Bildwissenschaft, contemporary art, megalopolis, Mexico City, urban anthropology, urban imagineries, urban photography, urban sprawl, urban theory, visual communication

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