

**Interview:
with Carl Zillich in the frame of the project
On Translation/Transparency**

Architecture acoustique

The interview took place in a Berlin apartment on 22.06.2007 during dinner with invited guests; the cameraman, editor and host Jan Daniel Fritz, artist and author of the project Aleksander Komarov, artist and photographer Susanne Kriemann, architect Tilly, project assistant and student of German Othilia, and Dr. Carl Zillich.

Aleksander Komarov:

Since 1999 one can go and watch the government working in the Reichstag in Berlin as a tourist attraction, daily and live. When I visited the dome at the Reichstag, it was like a magnetic feeling of forms that reflects the visitors in their surrounding. The static glass dome reveals a free play of light in space initiated by the movement of the viewer. And, thanks to the glass roof, we know the parliament is free to watch us. Do we witness the spectacle of a parliament in session, or is the transparency itself the spectacle?

Carl Zillich:

It is basically a duplication of rituals, where democracy - as we know it today - performs for its citizens. With the parliament sessions, where laws are discussed and voted on, there is actually something staged that has been done in the back rooms before. This building works that way too: it has transparency on top, there are the people or tourists who come there with the idea of being able to see the parliament; in that way it is an honest attitude and it does work for both sides. But on other hand the architect plays with this and delivers something else. Most of the time it is darker in the parliament space below than on top, therefore the glass reflects more than it is transparent, you basically cannot see what you might have expected. Still it seems to work well as there is the idea about transparency on both sides, but it is not an actual transparency. As you say, the transparency is the spectacle.

AK:

So the illusion that one is following the parliament working is an image formed in the head, mostly by memories of media images. The TV, newspapers, flyers, etc. When you go there as a tourist you bring those images with you. However, it is a deliberately framed view. One doesn't hear anything; or recognize the faces of the MPs.

Susanne Kriemann:

The mirror works like a screen, and you project your own memory material onto it.

CZ:

This begs the question, is that wrong? Our perception is conditioned from the beginning. It takes a big effort to get beyond what you have learned to see, hear or even feel. So you are right, the TV image is actually always with you. When you are in this building and actually talk about transparency, you have the glass camera or the screen at home dominating your perception, the reflection you see is not really important.

SK:

In that sense the parliament works like theatre, the scenario is the democratic process, and you, as the viewer, are part of the spectacle. In this sense the building is perfectly honest with its emphasis on the proper relation of a parliament session and the spectacle. If you look at modernist buildings you clearly see that the architects were busy with the dematerialisation of the building structure by making the façade transparent. And the Reichstag then actually reveals how opaque the system actually is, without even trying to hide it.

AK:

For me as an artist it is always about an imaginative way to see the combination of things. When we see the parliament, it is already by its set up related to the theatre. There is a public, there are the actors and there are the camera's that follow the play. And there is the performer, who rehearsed rhetoric and reads his speech from a paper. Only here the play is abstracted by the reflection. What role does the audience play on the roof? I think that the real spectacle takes place up there.

SK:

Ranciere referring to how aesthetics and politics could work together. Suggested that there was a clear division between form and politics. And how they incorporated in postmodern time. How one was critical became incorporated in to what now is not critical any longer.

CZ:

In that sense it is also interesting to look at this building in transformation, in certain epochs of the architecture. Naturally it was very representative in classical terms in the beginning: a parliament building which was perfect for a new democracy as it was competing with the typology of the castle. Now it has received some kind of update to the media based democracy. And that is where we can judge it in terms of the image of transparency it delivers. In addition we can discuss it in terms of a transparency of its confusion of reflections and its aesthetic effects that are actually taking place there.

When you look at the pictures the aesthetics of reflections, which makes it not transparent are as much there as the transparency. One could relate this duplication back to Donald Judd's definition of what he called specific objects, the combination of incompatible parts. In this building, where transparency and reflection in relation to light-conditions, that ambiguity is used strategically it seems. That makes it interesting even though on the other levels it is not working as transparent architecture.

SK:

I would like to come back to Ranciere, because he tries to define what fiction means in the sense of the aesthetics of politics. Fiction in ancient times was a kind of re-elaboration of what means to act, and now he refers to fictions as a re-elaboration of what signs mean. It is actually in this building that the signs are clearly outspoken about how we can read transparency. So that is what we said already, how we as a tourist understand the parliament working. And these signs actually create a fiction of democracy. But again in Ranciere's sense, this is not to be judged negatively, but another version of what is a possible narration.

CZ:

It is basically very bold gesture. It is not conceptual architecture; the idea of openness of the parliament is translated into as much glass as possible. The politicians today are used to the term transparency in many ways, but before that it was 'openness' or tearing down the barriers, which was of course related to the modernistic notion of opening up the box, letting light in, in our example: connecting the parliamentarians and the people. In that way it is an almost archaic image and therefore not contemporary, the discourse in art or philosophy went beyond such dichotomy by now. A more complex layering of perception, as the reflection where the self image appears and another, also aesthetic discourse is opening up.

Jan Daniel Fritz:

What is the connection between truth and transparency?

CZ:

I think that the transparent gives you the feeling that you can actually see what is behind. On the other hand, for me as someone who tries to interrogate the contemporary, I believe most of us are already conditioned to not believe what we see, hopefully. So there is a modernist notion of transparency, which dates from the industrial revolution to the 1920s, where there the idea of openness through a glass wall originates, then the effect still was to believe what one sees on the other side. But from a contemporary point of view, I would question if we have still that attitude towards transparency. You just have to look at science fiction movies as *The Matrix* where the dominant question is: do I actually look at reality, that would mean a window or do I look at fiction, that would mean a screen?

AK:

With regards to materialization, in the beginning of the 20th century, they were considering it a concept in itself. So, transparency, for Lazlo Maholy Nagy and the Bauhaus at that time was very new. Transparency reveals their forms. At that time "Light Prop" by Lazlo Moholy- Nagy is one example to seize the light in its structure and to make its power to modulate space and time visible in material existence.

As I understand it, the notion of transparency changes with rhetoric. I want to question if transparency is a phenomenon from the beginning of the 20th century. Because the material has its own aesthetic, its own values like thickness, heaviness, weightlessness, and transparency. But today we are speaking about "sickness" of the mind, "transparent" politics, everything is full of metaphors. The things could change to the level of artistic interpretation. So art, or media, has been helpful in bringing the rhetoric of politics to the public and, as well it is closely related to the immaterial subject. The contrary was forced by the Bauhaus which tried to exclude all kind of mysticism around objects.

CZ:

That is an interesting observation, because maybe it really is that way. What I tried to say before was that it is much more the niche or elitist, artistic, conceptual thoughts that could be contemporary.

But what you are focusing on, transparency in its material way, might, in terms of perception, be normal for everybody by now. The question then is, how much space and architecture, but also the arts, are produced for a small portion of people or whether it is actually for the big crowd, who now have such an attitude towards transparency. Because the transparency as you refer to in the 1920s was a niche that was developing as avant-garde and was probably not able to go all the way, to every body in their every day life.

Maybe there it would be interesting to think about German history in particular. Because Germany in the 1950s, after the second world war, had an attitude of continuity and new beginning, basically not talking about the past. There seems to have been a massive educational campaign of the 50ties by the means of architecture. If you look at the parliament district in Bonn, where the West German government staged its democracy, it was an almost blunt architectural language of openness and transparency. It is very interesting that it was a very minimalistic symbolism of architecture, also a technological attitude, which also wanted to related to the 1920s in a very direct way. So the 1920s then were taken or even recycled as some kind of political architecture. But today we are confronted with this representative attitude of the cupola again, which relates back to a previous epoch.

AK:

We know that history is a powerful force in constructing our identity and it has been intermingled with the language of architecture. In what ways do you think the history can be related to the notion of transparency, perhaps considering the example of the Bundestag?

Jan Daniel Fritz:

What is the connection between truth and transparency?

CZ:

I have two ways of speaking about that. First Norman Foster won the competition for the parliament building with the proposal not design a cupola but a flat roof for it, and it was during the discourse, negotiations and the democratic process afterwards when conservative forces in the parliament said that there should be a cupola on that building again, because it used to have a cupola until the 'Reichstag brand'. Then it was interesting what Foster did, quite smart actually. Because the second place of the competition was held by Santiago Calatrava, who actually designed a cupola with a strictly representative function. He mad that Norman Foster and the Parliament when they went for a cupola later on, without winning the competition with it. It was a very interesting discussion with quite some content as it was about that notion what is the cupola for this building? There it became important that Calatrava, relating back to the historical cupola, made it a representation, an artistic form that is a pure symbol. Foster instead managed to give it a new function: to have the people go up in it, to have this spiral, to have this idea of function and form combined in a modern way. Calatrava was not modern in that sense, because he did a mere representation and Foster did a very modernist thing, to combine form and function, a shape to be used which then reminds one of the cupola that was there, but has definitely not the geometry or the function of what was before.

AK:

I think it is very interesting that he won the competition with the flat roof. That is something else then to develop later the idea of the cupola.

CZ:

That is an interesting observation, because maybe it really is that way. What I tried to say before was that it is much more the niche or elitist, artistic, conceptual thoughts that could be contemporary.

But what you are focusing on, transparency in its material way, might, in terms of perception, be normal for everybody by now. The question then is, how much space and architecture, but also the arts, are produced for a small portion of people or whether it is actually for the big crowd, who now have such an attitude towards transparency. Because the transparency as you refer to in the 1920s was a niche that was developing as avant-garde and was probably not able to go all the way, to every body in their every day life.

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Othilia:

Why another part of this building is not glass?

CZ:

That one could call a trick of history. The then new parliament building in Bonn was finished I think two years after the wall came down, and that building was really a glass-wall-building, which Günther Behnisch designed basically in a straight line from the 1920s to the 1990s. The building resembles basically a car saleroom; a showroom. So of course with Berlin came the impression of history in a demographical way and actually as a way of assault on the present. The building was already there, and that is why it ended up like this, with the symbol on top, because the symbol had to be so strong on top that it can engage an equilibrium with the strong, historical foundation.

TILLY:

I think that nowadays I would understand the notion of transparency, that it really transports what the people are doing inside, that I could really understand what is inside the building, but you never see this. That means that transparency should be translated, and there somehow reflection comes into the subject, because with reflection you can put things together, and make a collage, and you can put meanings together. And I think this is an artistic way of dealing with the matter. I always liked the surrounding of the cupola, because the city is reflected in it. The people up there are not alone, but they see pieces of the city in the reflections of the cupola.

CZ:

Then we talk about the potentialities of the aesthetic dimension. I guess that this is what you are doing in the film, that you actually interpret the potential of the glass, which is not carrying the meaning, that the architect or the parliament themselves imposed on it. Your visual interpretation is another step of rematerialization, visualized with reflections, with day and night shots. It is then a different layer of interpretation, not architectural in a way, because the aesthetics cover up the function in from which it originates. I think that this is a really interesting separation. You actually use architecture as performative tool, and reveal its intentions.

CZ:

To take it one step further than what Tilly already mentioned, the question of re-materialization is most intriguing. If we accept that transparency is not the invisibility of a wall – that we have a material there, which changes its qualities during the day, according to the light situations, when its reflections show a materiality, or even a scratch or dirt, which you have to clean to make it disappear again – but always material, beyond a metaphorical invisibility, then we really have the chance of discovering a different meaning, one of layering, of translucency, of injecting information. This information can be either didactic, depending on the method, or can be abstract, depending how you deal with it.

SK:

Today, in 2007, we definitely have started to rethink technology, we are much more used to engaging with the possibilities and with the (un-) determination of technology. Dating from the modern movement of the 1920s, technology was always seen as determining function and the producing architects as the perception of the people were built on the maximised effect of technology. With the media and other aspects of live having changed radically since then, we are much more used to engage with technology in a different way by now. This is also where transparency and the material glass is much more liquid in a way, more flexible than we ever thought. There is a new potential beyond the technology that makes big windows possible, instead we can go one step further to look at the context, the issue of spatial organisation and perception, or even the abstract issue of security.

AK:

As, I've learned, the area around the Bundestag is protected by a law that regulates the representations of the buildings. Is this a recent development of the last decentness?

CZ:

Probably there has always been some kind of law about how to behave in and what to publish about certain public spaces. But it is interesting to ask how many laws does the building have: it has the law of physicality, of climate control, where even though there is transparency you have an inside and an outside, you have a passive and an active space, then an empty space in the middle and there are walls, real walls – the interesting thing is that they are transparent in the way that they are invisible. Actually you have contradiction, with the glass you try to diminish the physical separation of spaces, at the same time, after acting out the material separation, you hand out divisions in terms of written texts, a map of these lines which are demarcations that are political or expressions of power. But those must remain invisible, you do not get a map with these lines, they are abstract measurements of space – again, something what that we are getting used to: invisible borders like, when do we enter or exit a camera surveillance area?

JD:

It is a question of surveillance. Do you think that modern buildings are built in a specific way because surveillance is more important now than it has been before?

AK:

So here I would like to ask you about the economy of the transparency. As we figured out during the filming in the morning there is an army of cleaning people. They clean the offices and glass before working time starts, around 4 to 6 in the morning to make it shiny and clean. This is almost invisible for the rest of the people, as the action is executed in the night. My question is how much it costs to keep the building in its transparency function?

CZ:

It is interesting to tell what happened a couple of weeks ago. Before the 50th anniversary of the European Union was celebrated in Berlin, they closed down the cupola for three days to clean it for the first time completely. For the summit of the 27 heads of states of the European Union, they actually tried to re-establish the virgin qualities of the glass. It was a very interesting moment, a literal and conceptual attempt of transparency. Trying to re-establish its original state, which means as immaterial as possible, showed the effort it takes against all dirt, rain and dust that re-materialise the glass and go against the idea of transparency. All the time the system has to work hard to go back to its intentions. It sure is an interesting concept of economy, where you really have to invest not only when you built, but you have to re-invest into the idea every day.

SK:

If you look at the difference in size between the Reichstag with the cupola, and the actual Bundeskanzleramt, it is quite funny, and it shows really what is behind that scenario: the real power representation is located in the Bundeskanzleramt. And the Reichstag could almost hold his place in a kind of historical 'Funfair'. There are so many historical sites in Germany where the tourist pilgrim towards and satisfied walk away after performing what the building implies, without having even a look at the real place of power, in this case the oversized and humble Bundeskanzleramt.

CZ:

That is an interesting observation, also because the Bundeskanzleramt and the Bundestag office-building use much more archaic forms in their building aesthetics. It might be a contemporary interpretation of power, more abstract or hidden compared to historically loaded Reichstag. It is a very complex situation in urbanistic terms also. There is an amount of space needed in this area and they decided to have a very rigid, almost totalitarian urban plan of this one axis with the parliamentary offices and the Bundeskanzleramt in one line spanning from west to east. The offices have been given a very monumental space, which for me does not match the aesthetic quality of the materials. The urban scale works as a representation on that urban level, but on an architectural level it doesn't work, there are no details...

AK:

As we walk in public space we see everywhere the surveillance cameras and also monitoring ourselves when we are walking through the streets. Transparency also became a notion of seeing ourselves on camera, in the monitor, walking into the shop. So the buildings are preconditioned in terms of their economical structure, when it comes to performing safety, transparency, and democracy. Is it that the more we see ourselves the more transparent we get? Or is it the opposite?

CZ:

For me this dialectic does not work any more. I always look for the in-between, for camouflage and openness. To integrate all these contradictions should be the subject of our days. We do not have to deliver one truth, but something that has potential in many ways, where the user, or the one who perceives, has many – that would be a dream – singular attitudes towards the experience of space, of functions, of processes... Here I would like to quote Elisabeth Diller, from architect-duo Diller & Scofidio, who, already ten years ago, said something precise and challenging about this issue of surveillance: "We used to be afraid of being seen, and today we are afraid of not being seen." And I think it is more visible today than ever before that we want to be seen, or are we made to perform? The voyeuristic aspect is definitely turned around, and hopefully there will be a re-empowerment of the people by techniques or technologies of some kind.