

Leopold Kessler

Disguised in a janitor's blue coat and armed with a silver toolbox, Leopold Kessler subtly alters civic property or makes unofficial repairs to public services. His interventions in public space are actions that correct an urban problem or that alter the social meaning of a particular situation. For this exhibition Kessler has installed locks in various telephone boxes throughout London. Videos of his interventions are shown in the gallery space.

AM: What is it that interests you in making these changes in our environment?

LK: Public space is naturally a restricted area, as people have to be coordinated – it's a very complex system of power and individual intentions. The anonymity of public space gives me the possibility of acting unnoticed, as people only react if your actions conform to some idea of criminal behaviour. I'm interested in this tension between individual freedom, egoism and the interests of the authorities who have to maintain public order.

AM: It seems to me you are trying to make citizens question their relationship to their environment – through an empowerment, by increasing the degree of access to public space, but also through questioning whether or not that access was already there to begin with.



Privatized,
2001–2003
Photographs of
intervention
Courtesy of the artist
and Corentin Hamel
Gallery, Paris

'I installed receiver into eight streetlamps which enable me to switch the lamps on/off by a remote control.'

LK: If you introduce a strange object into public space most people will think 'this is art' and stop wondering about it, because they have an explanation for it. That's why I'm trying to install devices that seem to follow the logic of municipal authorities at first sight. Therefore it's important that they have an 'official' look. The locks that I install in the phone boxes pick upon a currently very fashionable topic: security. Authorities legitimize restrictions through the argument of protecting 'us' against potential dangers. To make people follow your instructions, you just have to make them afraid. The project with the locks taps into that: a lock means protection, but it also raises the question of against whom and what.

AM: Many of your projects – the intercom on the public tannoy system, the locks in the telephone boxes or the remote controls for streetlights – invert notions of public and private. To what degree do you feel you are giving citizens a new responsibility for their city and what about the potential for negative outcomes?

LK: In the case of the intercom the potential for misuse is a crucial point. The intercom gives you a power you know you shouldn't have. It's not just something like a speaker's corner, you speak through an official channel as the project involves a loudspeaker used for announcements by the public transport system. This power, as it has the potential for misuse, makes you behave more responsibly I believe.

AM: But the intercom could be used to assemble a riot or some kind of disturbance?

LK: The intercom project was installed a year ago and I showed the video twice in exhibitions in Vienna, so a lot of people know about it. If misuse had happened to occur, the secret would have been revealed, people would have reported it and the authorities would have banned access. When you use the intercom, you are more or less hidden, but you see the people you are speaking to; they are not abstract. I think anonymity is often a condition for misuse. The telephone locks function the other way around, don't they? You can only lock yourself in, not others, but the potential for misuse is still in one's imagination. The lock is there for protection – but what if a bad guy wants to protect himself?

AM: Are you keeping an eye on how your projects are used?

LK: This is difficult. Most of my interventions are designed to last for a long time and are used rarely. I cannot keep an eye on them even for two weeks; I'm not patient enough for this.

AM: Regarding the specificity of your interventions, do you try to locate your projects across the spectrum of the city's different areas to address a potential spectrum of use?



Secured, 2005
Video of intervention
Commissioned on
the occasion of the
*Do Not Interrupt
Your Activities*
Courtesy of the artist
and Corentin Hamel
Gallery, Paris

LK: I try to avoid working for specific groups of society. Laws are the same for all citizens (at least in theory) so, if an intervention can be realized in an edition (this depends on cost and effort) I like to spread it out. The locks for example are installed in different neighborhoods. When I show the documentation of these interventions in a gallery space subtle differences may become apparent. Here you may ask yourself about all the different ways in which you as a passer-by (depending on your personal inhibitions) might have been tempted to interact. The imagining of these possibilities comes from showing the projects in the gallery space.

AM: So the art context literally adds another perspective to your projects. Would you describe your work then as being the act, or the documentation, or the unseen response of the passer-by, or all of these?

LK: I don't regard the video as just a piece of documentation. My act of intervention can't become a performance with an audience as this would destroy the inconspicuousness. Also the videos become narrative or sometimes even instructional. The videos reveal the whole truth about my project, whereas the passer-by just sees somebody at work. When you watch the video you share the secret.

AM: So do you feel that your actions become understood as subversive through the existence and then presentation of a document? This creates two very specific audiences that witness your work, the art audience and the passer-by, one who understands it as subversive and the other who is subverted by it in some way.

'I installed locks into several phone boxes in London.'

LK: Yes, but don't forget, I also make other works where I subvert the people in the exhibition.

AM: What do you think about the potential for these gestures to be perceived as pranks?

LK: I feel quite comfortable being connected with jokes. A joke always has to be logical in itself, and an artwork as well. Both challenge so-called reality, but the difference is if someone is telling a joke in a social situation, we know it's a joke – this is quite important. In my case, when people are confronted with something that looks official, no one knows whether it's a joke or art.

AM: Have you ever felt as though you are helping to evolve the city through sidestepping the bureaucratic procedures typically necessary for change?

LK: I hope not.



Intercom, 2003
Video of intervention
Courtesy of the artist
and Corentin Hamel
Gallery, Paris

'I installed a loudspeaker of the Viennese public transport. Through a box with a microphone people can make their own announcements. The box is twenty meters away so the speaker stays anonymous.'

AM: What if your work became assimilated by society and eventually adapted and adopted to become a now integral part of how we understand the use of the phone box for example? In some ways you are giving the city something that it didn't know it needed.

LK: If this happened it would mean that there was no punchline, or that it was missed.

AM: Certain projects such as the phone box employ objects that are an iconic part of a particular city's heritage, but also objects the use of which is fading or has come to an end. Are you interested in evoking or awaking a community's nostalgia for their monuments or is it more an interest in the obsolescence of the situation itself?

LK: Changes to iconic sites are different because those sites are not functional. But I think the comparison with the past is quite interesting because it teaches us that in the past a different standard was seen as normal. It was standard that you could make a phone call in a separate room, protected against rain and noise, and also you had a degree of intimacy. Today everybody who does not want to be heard makes himself suspect.

AM: To plagiarize an interview question, I wondered if you had any projects that you felt were unrealizable based on legal or practical issues?

LK: All these interventions started with the impossibility of getting permission. A vague idea for a project starts with a situation. A situation is made out of possibilities and impossibilities. The first thing you mentioned to me concerning making a public intervention in London was that there is surveillance everywhere. So I had to find a place in the blind angle of the surveillance, at the same time public and not: the telephone box. The lock that secures the box corresponds now with the world of surveillance, but in fact the lock on the phone box creates a private space that protects you from surveillance. For me art is pretty much about turning disadvantages into advantages; it creates a process that tests the system from within.

AM: What would have been a failure?

LK: If there had already been locks in the phone boxes.

Aaron Moulton