

*Artistic Repairs to the Public Space*

In the course of his artistic interventions, Leopold Kessler comes across as a subtle, mildly inspired engineer, locked in a world of his own, indifferent to everything going on around him, and totally absorbed in his own task. His conviction as to the appropriateness and necessity of that task appears unshakable. The fact that he has great psychological aptitude as an actor is the cornerstone of his artistic success. It allows him to carry out all of his public actions calmly and free of distractions—even when they verge on antisocial mockery. The second component of his success is significantly more complicated, and relies on an extremely well developed ear for what's going on in the public sphere. The third part, and the keystone of the trio, is his artistic talent—the culmination of a fantasy in which he imagines something that seems to exist, and is capable of making that intuition real. The mystical difficulty of the moment has to do with the fact that – counter-intuitively - the ‘something’ in question does not exist. It does not exist as long as the artist refrains from using formal deception to turn the intuition into a fact, a picture. This is the magic of art.

Leopold Kessler is a young artist, yet the number of existential excavations that he has managed to carry out in the public space is truly formidable. This is all the more surprising because he has dug in unpromising sites, shrouded in banality. Nevertheless, he always manages to come up with something important. With his discoveries, he frequently censures the participants in the public space for their consent to restrictions on their freedom, for repressing the critical reaction towards absurdity, for reducing the great to the trivial, and for surrendering their awareness of their social roles—and a great deal else. His new works will surely add to the list. In order better to understand the artistic potential of the public space, it is first necessary to describe this phenomenon.

The public space is a place to which every citizen has the same rights, and where every citizen is free or restrained in the same way as every other citizen. This principle does not apply to the privileged services, which usually enjoy considerably greater freedom—to the extent, of course, that they can justify this as being a part of their doing their job. Politicians have the greatest freedom: at moments, the public sphere may be brought to a standstill for their convenience, with all functions suspended except those that serve them. Nevertheless, these exceptions do not undercut the basic principle of the public space, which is egalitarianism. In itself, the public space, embodying equal access, creates the democratic instinct, although this is not its overt intention. Another principle of public space is the subordination of specific areas to specific functions. Streets are for driving, pavements for

walking, shops for shopping, railway stations for organising journeys, churches for praying, and swimming pools for swimming. The public space is precisely and fairly rigidly organised in practical terms. As long as functions conform to the designation of location, the public space seems neutral. This conformity makes reflection super-rogatory, and reduces the public space to something unnoticed. No speculation arises as to designations of use, since all such uses are taken for granted and explained by the function attributed to a given location. Should the logic of these functions be violated in the most obvious way, however, and a woman push a pram in the road, then cars will drive on the pavement, someone will start washing their socks in the fountain, somebody else will set up a chair in a shop and begin reading, a boy will repair his bicycle in church, the church organist will begin performing Abba's greatest hits, and our perception will be overwhelmed by the dissonance between use and declared function.

Its generally accessible and pragmatic nature aside, the public space also serves as a social projection screen. Those who enter it try to project themselves in accordance with their own imagination or dreams about themselves. On the one hand, there are strict rules in place as to display, such as a total ban on appearing naked. On the other hand, clothing and props afford considerable latitude in constructing declarations on the subject of oneself: I am rich, I am nonchalant, I am restrained, I am ascetic, I am artistic, etc. Since its inception, the public space has functioned as an anthropological gallery where all flaunt or suppress their identity as they see fit. Of these three aspects—accessibility, function, and projection screen—artists usually opt to poke fun at function, by introducing into the public space absurdities to which at first glance our healthy impulses are inclined to attribute some sense and purpose, while only later, and therefore all the more strongly, experiencing the absurdity. Some artists also make use of the public space as projection screen and 'highlight' the participants in it in some unexpected way, by permitting them to say things for which the public space is not prepared.

Leopold Kessler abjures all these methods. He has discovered a method of his own, and it is exceptionally simple, yet also highly refined. The methods discussed above place the artist in the role of outsider, making of him a figure from outside the public space, arriving from the alien world of art to help or to create confusion. In either role, the artist is clearly differentiated, and brings in 'alien' methods that bewilder the participants in the public space and induce them to react to the blatant intrusion. Kessler does not appear as an 'alien.' Instead, he cunningly infiltrates the public sphere as if he were a part of it. At times, he appears as a technician repairing a streetlight, trimming a tree, adjusting the height of a litter bin, or conserving an old inscription near the river. Elsewhere, he plays the role of a

freeloader tapping into someone else's electricity cable, hiding money behind a 'police' sign, or smuggling cigarettes on a train. In the meantime, he thinks about social divisions, puzzling over the irrelevance of the difference between first class and business class, or between being a servant and being served. There are also times when he acts in an antisocial way, making holes in road signs or draining water from a swimming pool. Each of these roles, positive or negative, is recognised by the public space. This is why random observers do not perceive him as an 'alien': on the contrary, they react to him as if he belonged there, doing what he is doing.

Leopold Kessler's films are usually brief études that concentrate fully on their subject and resist interpretive suggestions. The artist—a pragmatic minimalist—takes pains to keep every aspect of the film economical. He uses the simplest props and the essential technical solutions, the shortest possible time for the action, which is as quiet, in psychological terms, as possible. He subordinates everything to capturing an uncontaminated effect. For this reason, he pays no attention at all to the technical quality of the image. If the situation requires a totally hidden camera, he opts to conceal it in his clothing; this makes the image 'nervous,' with blurring. None of this matters. The only important thing is the sharpness of the meaning, obtained in such cases at the cost of technical quality, in combination with the brutal dulling of all aesthetic ornaments and superfluous acting ambitions. In this regard, Kessler is exceptionally unyielding. That's how he is. His technical and aesthetic asceticism look like the free play of the instincts, rather than a deliberate struggle; this charming nonchalance characterises his films.

In a way that seems almost reluctant, Leopold Kessler's films depict modest, apparently banal incidents on the street. Deep beneath this distanced recording lie intentions only hinted at: showing something, thinking, criticising, shocking, and being ironic. In some films, the artist appears as an actor in the scenes he arranges. In others, he is a tripod for the hidden camera. In others still, he only installs the observing camera. In each of these variants, he attempts to avoid revealing his own commentary, thoughts, or feelings. He leaves a great deal of subjective leeway for his audience. However, this is not complete freedom, since the subjects that Kessler chooses for his art are objectified by the very fact of belonging to the public space, which is the same for everyone. When we think about this art, we are not penetrating the hidden byways of private poetry, but, rather, discovering things that have to do with others, which the public space lies about or simplifies 'for our own good'. They are the same for everyone, although not everyone can grasp them, because some people are too trusting of the 'reasonableness' of the public space. The public space is a projection of the

social personality. It promotes obviousness and tries to convince itself and others of its own health. Such a falsified mask, proclaiming functionality, rationality, and pragmatism, begs for artistic commentary.

In his work so far, Kessler has drawn attention to several aspects of the public space, and he revisits them in turn. A wide range of subjects interests him. He discovers the obvious and the minor absurdities concealed beneath them. He investigates the sense of voyeurism, examines the social contract and the shifts in meaning that result from it, wonders at social hierarchies and the artificial mechanisms for demarcating them, reflects on the value of restrained antisocial behavior, undercuts the anonymity of people using the public space, analyses the intersection between privacy and the common sphere, acts as a parasite on the public space, and even commits ‘crimes involving minimal social harm’. He carries out these analyses and commentaries in an especially simple and laconic way in his work. It is worth taking a closer look at the things that Leopold Kessler concentrates on.

Voyeurism has appeared so far in two of his films, *The Life of Others* and *Augarten*. Its purpose is not the perverse satisfaction of curiosity, but, rather, the examination of what we actually see. The conclusion is that we barely see anything at all. *The Life of Others* is set in the staircase of a Nowa Huta apartment block, opposite the apartment rented by the Crazy Guides Company and shown to tourists as a museum of private life in Nowa Huta in the 1950s. A hidden camera records the arrival of various groups, with a time stamp at the bottom of the screen. The shots are simple: a guide, a group of tourists with backpacks and cameras, the opening of the door and the admission of the guests. What happens inside remains unknown. The people who open the door are usually wearing T-shirts printed with the company logo, but on occasions an ‘anonymous’ person appears. This could be a sign of illicit tourism. Several events are certainly secret and not necessarily according to the company’s operating procedures. The second ‘voyeuristic’ film is *Augarten*. We see an out-of-focus black-and-white image framed by a wreath of leaves. Every so often, a car drives up. A man approaches the wreath. We can see his face and his hand, which touches something. This mystery is in fact something simple and banal. We are witnessing the activation of the switch of a siren that signals the closing of a park for the night. The persons on film are guards reaching out to push the button next to which the hidden, miniature camera is installed. Its unusually narrow field of view does not allow us to arrive at such a supposition; information about the circumstances of the making of the film is necessary.

Each recording is more or less limited. This falsifies the recorded image. Kessler’s ‘voyeurism’ points to some enigmatic significance, deliberately and with premeditation. What

does the right to interpret such an image derive from? What do we really see, and what do we only know? How much is an imaginative predisposition, and how much a pathological need to ‘know for sure’?

Another problem is analysed in *Schnorrer*, a cycle of photographs that will continue to grow as long as Kessler continues to smoke. Strangers relatively frequently ask smokers for a cigarette. Kessler has transformed this begging into a contract. He agrees to provide a cigarette in return for permission to take a picture. The beggar becomes a party to the contract, and this unexpected social distinction is noticeable in the photographs. The fact that abjectness can so easily be turned into a sense of self-importance suggests that the whole complicated game of social hierarchies, with its pompously solemn derision about who is higher and who is lower, who is better and who is worse, rests on similarly shaky ground. And, indeed, Kessler finds two such situations. The photography cycle *Class Divider* depicts the slender boundary of the curtain separating business class from economy class on an airplane. It can plainly be seen through a crack that the world of ‘better citizens’ is the same, and that everyone uses the same aisle. *Service active/passive* uses a dialectical game to demonstrate the problem of social hierarchy. On one screen, this two-screen projection shows the washing of windscreens on the street; on the other screen, it shows the washing of hands in the lavatory of an exclusive restaurant, where a special attendant is employed to dispense soap and towels. After earning the required sum on the street, the artist goes into the exclusive lavatory to get rid of both the dirt and the money that were ‘earned’ on the street. He appears first as a despised servant who is often shooed away, and then reappears a moment later as a respectable gentleman generously handing out tips. The obvious question arises: where does he really fit in? In the case of the artist, the answer is usually simple: closer to the margins.

On several occasions, Leopold Kessler has transgressed the boundaries of social norms in his art. This prompts at least two reflections. The first, which applies to several films, is based on actions that seem to be antisocial. *Rotana Fountain* is an action and film made in the United Arab Emirates. Kessler was living in an exclusive hotel with a swimming pool at second-story level. He took advantage of the difference in height between the pool and the courtyard below to install a primitive fountain in the yard, which senselessly watered the street. The priceless water spouting from an installation that resembled a leaky pipe rather than a romantic fountain, the accidental nature of the place, the shoddiness of the construction, and the suspect source of the water were all *prima facie* indications of absurdity. Nevertheless, there was no reaction at all, beyond somewhat prolonged glances from a few passers-by. This highlighted the faintness of the impulse from the public space. The entirety

of the information made too little impact to snap passers-by (including observers) out of their privacy and their absorption in their own aims and activities. The simple act of stealing and wasting water from the swimming pool made it possible to spy on the reaction (or rather the lack of reaction) to signals emanating from the public space. Another investigation led to an even riskier action, verging on a disturbance of the peace, as shown in the film *Perforation*. Kessler constructed gigantic sharp-ended pincers and walked the streets of Vienna, making holes in selected traffic signs. Sometimes he made one hole, sometimes two, and sometimes more. The signs looked as if they had been shot with a rifle, or a burst of rifle fire. As is usual in such actions, Kessler was dressed in a technician's smock and went about his 'duty' indifferently and seriously. He damaged public property with a full feeling of duty. The absurdity of the entire action notwithstanding, our reaction seeks some practical rationalisation. We heave a sigh of consent to the sense of the action. Perhaps signs are being marked for replacement. A salient quality of the public space is revealed: everything that happens there is endowed with practicality and justification. Another, more delicate variation of forcing sense onto the absurd appears in the film *Rubbish Bin*. Equipped with a metal case and stepladder, Kessler turns up outside a Vienna church and changes the height of the eponymous litter bin, raising it out of reach. Passersby look on in total indifference. There is not even any reaction or puzzlement about why the container is too high for the two men removing broken glass from one of the church windows and looking for a place to discard it. These two protagonists, most entitled to puzzlement or even outrage at the stupidity of a bureaucratic decision, are a real godsend in this film. Kessler never uses any other actors apart from himself, and depends on the actions of the public sphere. *Rubbish Bin* happens to feature an authentic event that confirms his artistic intuition: two men, desperate to discard something, regard the location of the useless rubbish bin, at a height of three metres, as justified. Without this scene, the conclusion of the film would be similar, but the happenstance affords it greater expressiveness and demonstrates how important it is for the participants in the public sphere to find whatever happens there acceptable.

Artistic public service is a counterweight to this antisocial artistic behaviour. In *Uncovered*, the artist takes great pains to trim a gigantic leafy overhang obscuring an important traffic sign in downtown Vienna. In *Repaired*, he replaces a burned-out fluorescent tube in an underpass before placing his name on the glass shade as the author of the work. In *Renovated*, in turn, he hangs over a flood barrier on a dangerous river to repaint meticulously an almost unreadable inscription, 'Swimming Prohibited. Risk to Life', again placing his name below it as author of the renovation. This simple gesture—in which the proud act of the

signature is combined with a routine everyday task—means a great deal for artistic reflection. In the first place, and this is the simplest definition of art, the fact that it is dialectical is not detrimental. The work of art is not what is signed on the outside; rather, it is that which bears the signature of personality within itself, in its content and form. At the same time, these signed repairs by Kessler—having more to do with the surface—signal the human longing to make something of oneself, to leave behind oneself things that—by somehow containing us—testify to our existence.

Another form of repair, decidedly more creative and also possessive, appears in a group of works that play with transferring private principles into the public sphere. In *Secured*, a London action, Kessler installed internal bolt locks in a telephone booth, thus eliminating the anxiety over the possibility that someone will interrupt an important telephone call with silly demands to hurry up and finish. In *Alarm Clock*, he added an alarm-clock mechanism to a large clock in the street. A remote control makes the alarm go off to ‘wake up’ the street. In *Privatised*, the power over the public sphere is even greater. The streetlights have been modified so that they can be turned on and off, at will, by remote control. This is an exceptional instance in Kessler’s art of the idea of the film being turned into a commercial product. One of the artist’s French collectors sold the right to ‘control’ a streetlight visible from his window. It could be turned on and off from inside the room. Supper at the collector’s and his joy over his new acquisition served as the occasion for making a new film, and a very unusual one at that, because it commented not on the space of life, but rather on the space of art.<sup>1</sup>

Kessler’s next approach to the public space is an attempt at discovering places where it can be made use of, where something can be taken, without submitting to the charges imposed upon us at every step. The artist searches for ways of being a parasite on the public space. His diploma work at the Fine Art Academy was the first such effort. He ran a sturdy electric cable from the Academy across a large part of town and used public electricity for a month. No one asked any questions about the installation and no one protested. The humorously ironic aspect of the installation was that he was taking electricity from a place that taught art. In *Safe Deposit*, in turn, he renounced the use of banks and, instead, kept his money behind an illuminated ‘Police’ sign, making deposits and withdrawals through the cut-out letter ‘O.’<sup>2</sup> In *Surfing*, one of the films he made in New York, he used a powerful suction cup to attach himself to the back window of a tourist bus and travel around filming the city with a camera

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<sup>1</sup> *Le nouveau réverbère de Philippe.*

<sup>2</sup> Kessler has never obtained permits for any of his actions in the public space.

attached to his head. The field of vision is exceptionally limited, with only narrow fragments of the street visible to the left and right. On the other hand, he had a great deal of freedom, wasn't paying anything, and could get off whenever he chose. The parasitical films are full of irony, but also of nostalgia for autonomy. They analyse the economy of freedom in the public space, which is defined above all by restriction.

Kessler also participates in the public space as an 'innocent offender'. In the film *Import*, he waits at the Westbahnhof for a train from Budapest, aware all the time of the place where a concealed packet of cigarettes has been glued. He removes the contraband and lights up with great pleasure. It is probably permissible to carry a single packet of cigarettes across any border. Therefore, no crime is committed, even though all the signs of one are present. The crime is encompassed in the intention, not the deed. The imagination sees a crime even as the reason denies it. Neither of these two sides can resolve the dispute, but interpretation leaks in and deposits a strange, perverse taste on the innocuous event. This type of interpretive trap is proper to events about which we do not have complete knowledge—that is, to most of the events in the public space. In this case, Kessler's art serves almost as a warning against interpretive inaccuracies.

Leopold Kessler's creative method demands great discipline of inspiration from the artist. The success of such art depends on the precise control of his impulse to give in to his fascinations. Only those that conceal a 'repetition of fascination' may be yielded to. In each of his works, the artist highlights some 'pathology' of the public space, something chronic that affects all of its participants. This valuable viewing apparatus is privatised by performing the act of looking in the name of others. Kessler has a great feeling for the public space. In time, undoubtedly, it will be possible to use his works to compile a description of public space, in order to see how it differs from private space, and what it means to people to balance continuously between the principles of the one and the conventions of the other.