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DON'T FIX THE PUDDLE

A Puddle Archive as Ethnographic Account of Sidewalk Assemblages

MIRJA BUSCH AND IGNACIO FARIÁS

The puddle lives at the corner of Kingsland Road and Dunston Street close to the King's Canal in London. It has an oval form. It is approximately 130 × 50 centimetres and at its deepest, although this of course depends, is approximately 5 centimetres. It is one of those puddles that is almost always there, that stays almost unaltered even many days after the last rain. People don't seem to pay much attention to it. The sidewalk offers enough space to simply walk by. No conflicts of use on sight. The puddle seems to have created a spot of its own, earned a right to existence, a place from where to reflect on its surface the life of a London street.

We came to know this puddle in 2010, as we were living close by. Since then, puddles have become a shared matter of concern, a phenomenon to scout for and observe across every city we have visited ever since, an object at the core of a practice in between visual arts and anthropology, an artefact to collect, a thing to think with.

Puddles do not just proliferate in cities, but literally everywhere where humans create lines and surfaces in the environment. Just follow a path in the forest. Here is where the puddles are. The sidewalks of modern urbanism – imagined and designed as a tabula rasa for human displacement and sociality – are indeed the archetypical environment of puddles. Puddles thrive with modernism, in modernist environments. They are modern others. Not the other 'to' modernism, but the other 'of' modernism, similar in this regard to the modern monsters we are just learning to face in



Figure S5.1. Sampler from London. From *Puddle Archive*. Photograph by Mirja Busch.



Figure S5.2. Collecting puddles for the show *Puddle Archive*. Photograph by Mirja Busch.

the wake of the Anthropocene. But puddles are not monsters. Puddles are like modern shadows: a mostly overlooked, but omnipresent insinuation of darkness, pointing to the limits of modern design and control over environments given the overpowering excess of geological forces, the capacity of soil and rain, of earth and water, not to destroy the modern project, but to deform it, to render it strange.

We speak of puddle visions. Things appear on their surfaces upside down. Matter out of place. Sky on the ground. Trees on the pavement. Colours painting the grey pavement. Sometimes bright and shiny, sometimes transparent and timid, puddles offer us visions in the double sense of the word: the ability to see what is there and the experience of seeing things that are not there. Puddle visions reassemble the urban, stitching and mending entanglements among things that are to be kept separated according to modern urbanism. Urban natures and urban cultures, technical infrastructures and social practices, the city and the weather. Puddles transform supposedly human sidewalks into the life spaces of microbes, larvae, plants, or into the swimming pools of birds and other animals. They also transform a supposedly sober background for human practices into a cinematic experience with moving images changing with every step and



Figure S5.3. Sampler from Berlin. From *Puddle Archive*. Photograph by Mirja Busch.



Figure S5.4. View of the show *Puddle Archive*. Photograph by Mirja Busch, Gallery cubus-m, Berlin, 2014.

every angle. Rather than signalling material decay, puddles bear witness to the situated hybridity of the urban.

Collecting puddles in cities thus becomes an archaeological practice into the variations of urban assemblages. Can you recognise a city through its puddles? Is there such a thing as the typical London puddle? How do they differ from other cities' puddles? The ones we saw in Buenos Aires? Brussels? Or any of the twenty cities from which we collected puddles? Suddenly the focus of attention is displaced and we start to pay attention to the materials and designs of sidewalks. I've surely walked on that kind of street, but where was it? Sidewalks are indeed anything but a *tabula rasa*. Bricks of different forms and tonalities, stone patterns, sandy joints, tile compositions, concrete ribbons with or without expansion joints, continuous slabs, curb and edge forms, trench drain systems, manhole covers: sidewalk materials, technologies and designs are significantly different from place to place, also depending on the historical periods and trends of sidewalk construction. And yet, by displaying them together grouped by cities, we are doing more than insinuating a comparative method for the elucidation of urban identities. If we look long enough at each of these urban compositions, we might start to discover urban difference, the radical



Figure S5.5. View of the show *Puddle Archive*. Photograph by Mirja Busch, Gallery cubus-m, Berlin, 2014.

multiplicity of cities, the irreducibility of each corner, each sidewalk, each puddle.

Water . . . at Last

An insight into how things are under the surface. Groups of bottles containing the water of single puddles. If the total water volume of a puddle was a conundrum, imagine colour. So here we are surrounded by 199 bottles containing eighty-three puddles from different places in Berlin – a parking lot, a street crossing, a backyard, a Catholic cemetery, a playground, a hospital entrance, a building site, a museum stairway, an airfield, a castle, a memorial, a bridge, a promenade, a tourist attraction, a train station, a park, a wasteland, a red-light district, a schoolyard, a truck stop and so on. The surprisingly wide chromatic spectrum of puddles invites or rather forces us to think about the specific materials that shape the practices unfolding in these places. Can we trace the particulate material floating within each bottle back to these uses? The materiality and colour of puddle water as a speculative device to reconstruct urban social practices, to activate

knowing and speculative exercises. The puddle archive as an ethnographic experiment, that is, an experimental way of documenting and archiving urban materials, urban lives, urban worlds.

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