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## Neutrality

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This construction is part of a larger project called 'Neutrality'. It is a probe for exploring transformation processes of the contemporary human environment, states of operativity, polity-space relations.

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Neutrality is a research on transformation and control of contemporary space: international, local, urban, humanitarian, political, conflictual, economical, financial, military, institutional, natural, global, individual.

As we take a further step into the shards of contemporaneity, uncertainty appears to be a ground condition in human activities. If modernity mastered the construction of differentiated scenarios and the evaluation of risk assessment and control, today the very rapid growth of expert and sectorial rationalities and the innumerable visions they project on the contemporary territory creates a condition difficult to manage and even discern.

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In the EPFL labs at the edge of the city of Lausanne, a series of large scale models are used to simulate the diffusion of fog and mist in the alpine environment, explored in its polytechnic dimensions. The fog model is next to other models used to study the dynamics of river floods, high altitude erosion and permafrost, avalanche kinetics etc'.

The constant attempt to control and modulate the risks of inhabiting the alpine environment are of course at the centre of the specific swiss territorial culture, where alpine passes have to be maintained, bridges protected, open connections guaranteed.

The constant attention towards the threat of nature comes along with the construction of a rigorous drive towards containment and reduction. To reduce risks and set everything in its proper place: a sort of anti-urban care for things which is an aspect of Switzerland that seems to be geared towards the outplay of conflicts, and almost paradoxically towards not participating, in a constant balance of forces.

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Beyond the cortical ridge of the Alps also lies Geneva, the city-state and Canton that is part of the Helvetic Confederation. Geneva is of course the city of Jean Calvin and the seat of innumerable international institutions, from the UN, to the WHO, from the Red Cross to the WTO.

Some of the issues linked to internationalism and how that relates to an enlightened moment of creation of a generalised and universal body of knowledge are part of the very materiality of the city, with the plethora of facility management reports, budget listings, surveys, directories and guides that try to manage the excess of special cases that related to the operativity of these international institutions and their exceptional extraterritorial status.

To articulate the set of differences in an organised and carefully planned manner is probably, again a typically swiss way of dealing the outplay of the unexpected, of chance.

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In his Nobel lecture, the Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan refers many times to the little girl in Afghanistan, the small boy in Brazil, the young woman in Africa, the man in Asia that all share the same, inalienable and universal, though rarely recognised and respected, human rights.

This call for more attention to the universal aspects of humanity that the UN is mandated to protect and expand is, one would say, normal. This normal call, however may have some implications that span far beyond what we might at first glance expect.

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Next December the Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan will step down from his position, after a long and articulated career dedicated to the reform of the institutional body of the UN, that saw the organisation move from being the preferred table of discussion and confrontation of the cold war to being implied with an unfortunately rapidly growing number of international missions for peace keeping and humanitarian relief.

Interestingly, the reform of the UN sponsored by Mr Annan are all leading to the establishment of the organisation as a body of international sovereignty, a body that oversees the implementation of the universal rights, where borders and boundaries are not to be obstacles for the spread of the universal and general human rights: the UN to manage conflicts in a human world without borders.

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The last decade has been characterised by a rapid increase in the urbanisation process throughout the world, with a transition towards a situation where the majority of human settlements are now urban. Statistical figures indicate also that at the outset of the twentieth century, 10% of the world population lived in cities, in 2000 around 55% of the world population lived in cities and in 2025 the number of city-dwellers could reach 5 billion individuals (two thirds of them in poor countries). While global population has increased by 105%, city-dwellers have grown by 307% in the last hundred years (UN Global Urban Observatory).

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These changes mark the material organisation of the landscape and territory as well as their institutional framework. How are these transitions and the many human displacements that come with it setting an unprecedented pressure on re-shaping surfaces, borders and networks and re-inventing issues of citizenship: how is the contemporary human landscape re-organising itself?

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Switzerland is neutral in the way that it is a space for discussions between differences, where conflicts and wars can be discussed and mediated. It is and can remain neutral as long as its territory is immaculate and maintained outside the conflict. As long as it stays elsewhere. As long as it is not present. The particular institutional structure of Switzerland, built up from the smallest communities with a delegation of power towards the upper levels of the confederation, could also be understood in this sense.

To maintain this extraterritorial status, Switzerland has to preserve clear, stable and defined borders. It has to be outside the conflict.

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At the outburst of the Afghanistan conflict in winter 2001, Mr Kofi Annan was involved in a large number of tele conferences between Geneva, the UN headquarters in New York city and the UN representatives in the Asian state. Almost as in a world without borders, instant electronic connections seem to bring distances to a minimum.

The Afghan war was of course the immediate aftermath of the September, 11 attacks on the US. Suddenly, conflicts are no longer between two clearly identifiable territorial entities, with a front line or iron curtain to divide them. Now conflicts and wars seem to become at the same time everywhere and nowhere.

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The contemporary territory does not follow in its evolution a linear movement, where the succession of elements is distinct and causes clearly identifiable in their nature. The transformation that mark it are directed towards distant and concurrent goals, promoted by a multitude of actors. For this plural nature, the contemporary territories have a dynamic and shifting behaviour, marked by colonial, ethnic, racial, gender, political, social, military, technological, cultural confrontations. The material configurations of our societies and territories, together with their interconnections, are stepping away from complexity, endorsing a clear separation of functions and activities.

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The global operations of the UN are marked by the apparent construction of a world interconnected by logistical supply systems, networks of humanitarian relief operators connected in large networks, storage areas located in safe harbours, provisions chains etc'. These networks span the world and are plugged into a series of spaces for humanitarian intervention and relief: refugee camps, de-militarised areas, buffer zones, medical compounds, elections surveys missions, and peace keeping operative zones. All neutral spaces that clearly outline their borders, their spaces of possibilities.

To build the world without borders, islands of neutral spaces are implemented and managed throughout the rapidly changing landscapes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Islands run by universal and general rules, routines and practices, yet embedded in the magma of the shifting and conflictual human landscapes of rapid growth.

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UNAMI UNOGBIS UNOWA UNPOS UNSCO UNTOP MINURSO UNUB UNMOGIP UNOMIG UNOCI UNMIS UNMIL UNMIK UNMEE UNIFIL UNFICYP UNAMSIL etc'

These are some of the names by which these neutral and universal spaces of intervention of the United Nations are referred to. They all have an imprint, a footmark in the shape of a buffer zone delimited by clear borders, often over-guarded by military check-points and gates. A series of bubbles of neutrality?

Many of these code-names unfortunately also refer to serious difficulties, almost to the point of being accomplices to the conflicts they are trying to solve and mediate. To create areas of separation and demarcation within these unstable grounds, implies a redefinition of the relation between polity and space.

How can one create areas of quiet where the separation between violent contenders is not a spatial one?

Did the attempt to create neutral spaces for the suspension of conflicts have a direct influence on the scars between the Tutsis and the Hutu in Rwanda? And in Sarajevo? In Somalia? In Lebanon last summer? In Timor? In Sri Lanka?

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What is the problem we are trying to solve when we attempt to construct a rational territorial order? The answer is simple enough with regard to certain assumptions. If we possess all the relevant information and start out from a given system of preferences, commanding complete knowledge of the available means, the problem that remains is purely one of logic. That is, the best solution would be that all the marginal substitution rates between different possible allocations should be the same. However, this is emphatically not the problem that our society and its territories face, marked as they are by multiple and diverging local interests and projects: how can we rethink our modalities of planning and managing, beyond the centralised system of acquisition of information? How can we un-think the idea of management and control in our volatile societies?

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Internationalism and dissolution of the relation between place and society, grounded knowledge and growing mobilities and terrorism seem to call for a concomitant dissolution of the materiality of the city. Is it still possible today to tell whether our institutions are basing their discourses on international, infranational, transnational, intercultural, transdisciplinary grounds?

No more theories on the management of our spaces: a call often heard in relation to the many failures and difficulties tied to the western idea of modernity. There are many reasons to be humble about our understanding of the functioning of our contemporary landscapes. Yet, it is probably exactly the contemporary lack of theories and the extreme growth that are today's hallmarks. This double condition of being able to operate with extreme freedom in each context, devoid of ideological constraints and in a situation where the counterparts are becoming weaker and weaker, where they can no longer rely on a shared set of values, calls also for a step towards research. A step towards the development of an understanding of the concomitant hindrances and potentials. To try to manage them? To try to balance them? Try to neutralise them?

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Furthermore, the relations between polity and materic structures sit at increasingly oblique angles. The dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War, the confrontation with the increasing mobilities tied to the migration from the South, the downfall of many dictatorships in South America, the re-invention of the civil society in Europe's east, the sharp cleavages in the Middle East, the constant pressure on secularity, the rise of China, the decline of Africa's political structures all seem to render the scene even more complicated. A scene that resembles more and more a kaleidoscope of clearly outlined sectors. Everything in its own place, a place for everything.

How can we understand the operativity of our urban, political, cultural and intellectual environments amongst the multiple clusters of introverted, almost self-referential economical, political, cultural spaces and enclosed knowledge circuits that appear to be the critical hallmarks of today's growing urbanisations and cultural climate?

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Cyprus, in the East Mediterranean, is an island that is part of the EU, the European Union. Yet, the Government of the Republic of Cyprus reaches out only over one half of the island. In the north, a non-recognised government of the Turkish republic of Northern Cyprus. In between the Green Line, the buffer zone managed by the UN is a long and narrow strip of territory that crosses the entire island. The green line is not a line, it's a surface. It is a territory in itself, which comprises of logistic centres, checkpoints, airports, compounds, storage spaces, barracks and some ruins of the touristic resorts built in the late '60 and '70s on the coast. The ruins are actually a city in itself, the abandoned seafront of the city of Famagusta, from where the greek population escaped when the Turkish army occupied the northern part of the island. Cyprus is today the most radical experiment of post national management of territory, charged with the whole spectrum of cultural references to marginality and relativist discourses. An island *inter alia*.

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This green line cuts in two the perfect circle of the walled city of Nicosia, a monument of the Venetian cosmopolitan republic. At the two sides of the buffer zone, two radically different ways of engaging with differences. On one side night clubs, casinos, social housing, traditional public spaces, russian exclaves and new resort cities are intermingled with the minarets of the new mosques. On the other, national marks are exacerbated in a meltdown of greek flags, northern European hotels and touristic resorts, references to the British Empire colonial legacy. Two sides of one country which is hardy trying to cope with a post-nationalistic reality. Set aside, the two large British military bases of Akrotiri and Dhekelia.

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During this summer war in Lebanon, Cyprus became the safe harbour for the humanitarian intervention: one UN buffer zone trying to act as escape valve for another UN buffer zone. UNIFIL and UNFICYP. Both in a difficult situation.

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Two points seem to be particularly interesting when we think of neutrality as a mean to manage these transitions, as a dispositif of change of the contemporary space, tuned to balance the conflictual forces that flare up in almost every human settlement. First of all, in constructing an overview of contemporary human settlements, we are thinking of a world without borders, a world whose parts have become increasingly plugged into each other, and which today is completely cordless at every turn, in which we have migrations of an endless kind almost at every point of the world. The second point is that the implementation of this borderless world is accompanied by an intermingled and entangled overlapping of logistic supply networks. Wherever these transitions are occurring, new principles have been theorised to examine the nature of globalisation and contemporary transformation processes. Today, not to have a policy, not to stand for something, not to take part, not to participate, to be a-political is becoming more and more a difficult, contrasted, almost immoral condition.

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Yet these difficulties and uncertainties, are also an entry point to the unveiling of the comeback of the physical condition, of the materic body of our contemporary territories. Entering the contemporary condition seemed in the last decade a drift towards a common vanishing point, where cities, territories, matter, nature would have become virtual, interchangeable, generic: the set of ephemeral activities. What has happened? Conflicts and terrorism are scattered throughout the world, entrapped in the meanders of the physicality of their scenarios. Nature is making its energetical return, polities struggle to manage change, social and technical infrastructures face similar strengths and vulnerabilities. Reality is back in all its materic strength. History has started moving again.

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How is the city of the 21st century shaping its structures in relation to these forces? How are they managed and balanced? Neutrality is a specific way of organising matter in space in order to create an operational zone where to manage conflicts, contradictions, diversities. An operational zone clearly demarcated by borders, by control devices, by separation and exclusion of conflicts. Neutrality is a modality of creating a counterpart to the hierarchical understanding of geopolitics, of identity, of war, of the nuances of peace and internationalism in the wake of globalisation. An attempt to turn our gaze towards reality, away from our theories. It is stated as a purely pragmatic attitude.

To be neutral, in a certain sense and under certain circumstances, can be understood as the ultimate contemporary political and powerful condition. A condition that engages individuals with the spatial organisation of our institutions, our societies, our nations, our differences, our wars.