Identifying care-utilization relations through unruly sites at the public park Gleisdreieck in Berlin

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[Audio: Gleisdreieck_2] Source: Franziska Klaas

As we enter the park from the south, it has already become noon. The sun beats down with all its might on the fallow rust-brown tracks that stretch out before us. The tracks end in a thicket of bushes, trees and ruins of the old railroad freight yard and lead past manicured lawns and artificially constructed mammoth-sized swings. Inline skaters, bicyclists, and strolling walkers pass us in long lanes, lined with birdsong, rustling leaves, and the sounds of the S-Bahn as it rushes tactlessly by on the tracks running parallel to the park.

The park was not a park at first, nor was it intended to be one in the conventional sense.

As early as the 1970s, the area was already a site of urban struggles over unused space and the preservation of the area's status quo. While committed citizens argued for the preservation of the area in its current form, the city suggested its conversion into an urban highway. The area's decaying condition, which it had fallen into during the Cold War as a neglected landmark between West and East, forgotten and left behind between the two zones, was to become the subject of modern urban planning ideas. In the end, the antagonists agreed on the transformation of the area into an alternative recreational area that would both accommodate the flourishing flora and fauna and provide recreation for the urban dwellers. In 2013, through active citizen participation, “an inaccessible abandoned land (...) and an urban open space in the greenery” („unzugänglichen Brachfläche (...) und ein urbaner Freiraum im Grünen“), came into existence. At least that is how the state-owned construction company Grün Berlin (n.d.), which was commissioned for the conversion, headlines it on its website.

In the meantime, we have arrived at the ruins of the old signal station “Abwt”, which was shut down as part of the Anhalter Güterbahnhof during World War II. While listening to Nico Kupfer’s voice (Grün Berlin 2022), an industrial archaeologist who was interviewed as part of an audio guide through the park, our thoughts, inspired by the shape of the building, turn to those pasts in which hard physical labor and industrial machinery knew how to utilize both bodies and places. We ask ourselves: Which care and utilization practices are inscribed at these unruly sites and how do they change the prevailing understandings of nature and city?

Often something is perceived as unruly because it appeared outside of human control, often forgotten, or neglected, defined as unworthy and needless. Unruliness became tangible through our interaction with it. We could perceive, record and touch unruliness. Capture it for the moment. But in its ontological formation, it seemed at first indeterminate and chaotic.

Infrastructures and sedimented unruliness

To unravel the different understanding of nature and city, the Gleisdreieck park seems to be the perfect starting point. Providing many unruly sites, we hope to find out more here. However, unruliness is a relational concept. Nothing and no one can be unruly in and for themselves. Unruliness emerges in relations between bodies, materials, objects, and stories.

First, we recognized the redbrick ABTW house (Anhalter Bahnhof Westturm) as an old historical part of the area, which is covered with wild bushes that envelop the building. Quiet but persistent. Formerly an area with 49 tracks, all of which transported goods, today there is little to remind us of its industrial past. The sheer vastness of the area and the incomprehensibility of the magnitude and quantity of freight traffic can only be grasped in a fragmented manner if one actively immerses oneself in history. A history permeated by the utilization and exploitation of human labor and body. Utilization in this context implies the usage, application but also the exploitation of bodies and things. It defines an act or instance of "making practical or profitable use of something" (Dictionary.com).

[ABWT Stellwerk I] Source: Kathrin Eitel

We see it almost pictorially before us. At that time, men with soot-blackened faces toiled at the signal box, shunting the single wagons by hand and sweating while changing the direction of the tracks. The Austrian author and essayist Joseph Roth (1924) poetically described the "Gleisdreick" as a heart, the center of life: "This is what the heart of a world looks like, whose life is wheel belt swing and clock strike, cruel lever beat and scream of the siren. This is what the heart of the earth looks like, which revolves around its axis a thousand times faster than the change of day and night wants to teach us; whose incessant, immortal rotation seems madness and the result of mathematical foresight; whose frantic speed pretends to sentimental backward-seers

brutal destruction of inner forces and healing equilibrium, but in reality begets life-giving warmth and the blessing of movement." (Roth 1924, own translation).

The "blessing of movement" as Roth describes it, was at the same time also a means of labor-utilization, which continued, underlined and reified the binarization of work and life: every day, the Anhalter Bahnhof, as part of the Gleisdreieck and as the most modern train station in Europe at the time, transported up to 40,000 people since 1880. The anthropologist Nichole M. Shippen explains, based on Georg Lukács's "History and Class Consciousness", a colonization of a time-consciousness by capital, that is the usurpation of collective knowledge about history and time through capital. A process that developed silently on behalf of capitalism. In this regard, time-consciousness was reified "which denies individuals the ability to understand reality in terms of fluid historical and political processes." (Shippen 2016: 73). In the course of the rapid clearance and systematic transport of numerous workers who arrived at their workplaces every day with the help of the Gleisdreieck, utilization as reification took place – both of bodies (as objects of transport and, by extension, of work) and of a social time-consciousness that clocked-controlled people and their understanding of (working) time. Inscribed in the place, mobility tied to that functionality extends into today's infrastructures.

[Trains] Source: Kathrin Eitel https://youtu.be/FLVoXOSbR_w

"Profitable" use of the Anhalter-Bahnhof was further made when Jews were deported during the Nazi regime. Although most of the deportations of Jews in Berlin during the Second World War were conducted from the Moabit station (27,000 and 32,000 people), there were 116 transports with over 9,600 people from the Anhalter Bahnhof to Theresienstadt in today's Czech Republic. Under the name of "Alterstransporte" (elderly transports) only a few deportations could be carried out at what was called Europe's most prestigious train station, where the Nazi officials also boarded and disembarked, according to urban sociologist Dietline Peters (2011). Thus, the supposed "blessing of movement" helped to transport thousands of people to death instead of providing "life-giving warmth" (Roth 1924).

Despite or because of its complicated and controversial history, it is the fascination over the Gleisdreieck as a technological miracle of progress that perseveres and has given way to a practical transformational use of the ruins and old buildings of yore. Since the creation of the Gleisdreieck, the area has captivated many writers and artists (Berliner Woche 2016). Yet the keyword Gleisdreieck is already a literary and rhetorical topos, as Michael Bienert notes. In "Die Eingebildete Metropole" (1992), the literary scholar and cultural journalist describes how the topos is the basis for very different visions and symbol for a progressive and modern metropolis. At once, the Gleisdreieck was identified as an "indigestible foreign body", as the famous urban planner and architect Werner Hegemann (1930) depicts it, that "resides in Berlin's stomach" (Bienert 1992: 33, own translation). Thereby, the track triangle appears in the cityscape "like an enigmatic, unmistakable hieroglyph that seems to mean something without being able to immediately say what it means." (Bienert 1992: 39, own translation). Writers, such as Alfons Pacquet, Hans Kafka, or Günther Grass describe, however, the Gleisdreieck as formidable, menacing and associated with a "creepy effect" (Kafka 1929), resembling a spider.

In this context, the Gleisdreieck was and continues to be a place signifying modern capitalism as alienation (Bienert 1992). Using labor, time-consciousness and a common fascination over technological progress helped to establish clear boundaries between human and technology and thus fostered the separation of nature and culture. The latter one being tangible but alienated.

However, today, numerous graffiti also decorate the old walls, representing the transformation of the area as well as overwriting cultural history and context and making it possible to experience it anew. On the 160-meter-long "Legacy Hall of Fame", for example, spraying is expressly encouraged. Yet, there is also ample use of color in the park, as we can see at the ABWT signal box. Something that also becomes evident in the graphic

novel "Gleisdreieck" by Jörg Ulbert and Jörg Mailliet (2014), in which Ulbrecht revisits his own experiences during the Cold War with the forfeited and abandoned industrial ruin that became part of his search for freedom.

[Gleisdreieck - Ulbert] Source: Ulbert and Mailliet 2014

In this way, new space was created for alternative visions and ideas of a society through the utilization of these spaces. And at the same time, it seems that practices of care are at work here – this also includes graffities or elsewise practices of caring- more so than in any of the other examples we encountered during our stroll through the park.

[Video: Graffiti fenced] Source: Kathrin Eitel https://youtu.be/-d0BCXAsSpM

When care and utilization meet

Care, contrary to utilization practices, is primarily associated with the support and maintenance of bodies and things. Care is not necessarily just out there but can be layered or buried. It might express itself in hushed tones, in need of recognition. It needs to be noticed.

Situating care practices in more-than-human worlds María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017: 161) encounters care as an intertwined result of often invisible working commitments: “Care is everything that is done (rather than everything that ‘we’ do) to maintain, continue, and re-pair ‘the world’ so that all (rather than ‘we’) can live in it as well as possible. That world includes (...) all that we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.” In a feminist vine, Puig de la Bellacasa’s statement provides hints to the unrecognized and unseen care practices that take care of the “life-sustaining web” in which we are all entangled. In this way, care is understood as a form of *intentionality*, establishing a relationship to something true and real that is clearly aimed be taken care of. “Care (...) is done to maintain, continue, and re-pair ‘the world’”. This understanding of care often overlapped by its definition with utilization practices, however the scales are different. Urban initiatives cared for the park in general to sustain its utilization, while we also observed individual or private, i.e. non-governmental, forms of care/utilization as for instance a birdhouse someone had installed in one of the trees.

Care however can also materialize in practices of careful neglect or abandonment. Looking at the ruderal areas that are distributed within the park, areas of non-intervention or minimal intervention by human beings, the notion of care is turned upside down. Although care and abandonment are commonly understood as opposites (see for instance Biehl 2013), in the case of ruderal areas abandonment is an expression of care as it allows for other caring (read as maintaining and repairing) practices to occur. Without further human intervention, other actors, plants and animals, shape and sustain those patches non-intentionally and non-teleologically yet situated and as part of complex webs of co-maintenance.

[Gleiswildnis/ “track wilderness”] *Source*: Kathrin Eitel

Remote practices of caring for and utilizing space

"Shy and dusty, the future grasses will bloom between the metal thresholds. The "landscape" gets an iron mask." (Roth 1924). Roth's pessimistic vision of a future embedded in an iron prison did not come true for the time being.

[Birch and Tracks] Source: Kathrin Eitel

Instead, unexpected and invisible care practices were 'at work' in the park that do not explicitly aim to "maintain, continue, and re-pair 'the world'". In this context, caring for something/-body could be literally done by everything and -body in even unintentional ways. Even though there might be no clear target to whom/what care is practiced, as the following field note provokes:

[Flute] Source: Franziska Klaas

> "I walked off the paved path that stretches from the Monumentenbrücke to where the Gleisdreieck Park branches off into different paths - the actual park some might say-, into the bushes, when I heard a sound unusual and strange in such a place. Trees and undergrowth grew placidly, wild but tamed, enveloping or simply overgrowing the former tracks that led to Anhalter Bahnhof, next to the path. It took me a few seconds to realize that I was listening to the mirthful sounds of a flute played by someone in the distance, yet close enough for my ears to catch. (...) As I followed the sound deeper into the thicket, trying to record it with my cell phone without disturbing the musician who was playing so tenderly -for whom, himself, the birds, the trees? I would not know- I stopped walking and listened." (Franzsika Klaas, field notes May 20, 2022).

In this moment, when Franziska realized what and where the sound came from, she grasped the flute-playing as an *extensional* act for caring about the environment, the person's immediate surroundings by seeing it as deeply entangled with it.

> "My eyes glimpsed a body in the middle of a bush, spacious and hollow, holding space for one person, like a tiny green cave, sheltering them, allowing them to dance while making music." (Franziska Klaas, field notes May 20, 2022).

In these moments of serendipity, the moments of unexpected encounters with practices that equally encompass care for and utilization of space, the distinction between utilization and care became even more blurry. However, it also introduces another layer of care, which is attuning oneself towards neglected or marginal "things" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). It understands ethnography *as* care. Caring for what often stays hidden or invisible is a mode of care that pulls humans, animals, plants, objects and related practices which could easily be overlooked in the center.

Blurry boundaries: ruderal wasteland and parkland

The city – or rather the urban dweller – demands parks, green areas, recreational spaces. Nature is part of the reproductive infrastructure that keeps the urban individual functional. Thus, the city creates a unique habitat, which features an unmatched density of nature-culture and thus permits life, work and recreation in a limited space.

The prevailing narratives and ideas about nature in urban space often follow similar patterns: Nature either has to be tamed or else requires an explicit policy of "being left alone" in order to unfold its "naturalness." Meanwhile, contradictory practices of both letting be and enclosing unfold to facilitate "nature," though not in a wholly unregulated manner. What is understood as "nature" does not serve an end in itself, but is embedded in normative moments and politics of utility and utilization. Unruly sites can be a lens for understanding care and utilization aspects in human-environment relations. In the blurry boundaries between ruderal wasteland and ruderal parkland, multiple layers of (de-)valuation, exploitation, care and utilization become visible. It requires, however, previous knowledge or the help of a smartphone and the audio guide offered in the park to make sense of otherwise forgotten or silenced histories of labor, use or resistance/unruliness.

Our impressions and observations from our time spent in Gleisdreieck Park undermine these strict distinctions of ideas of urban nature. In that sense, the Gleisdreieck Park is more than a (contested) urban green space. It is also a sedimented history, which remains visible in the deliberately persisting remnants of infrastructure no longer in use. It is furthermore a place of merging practices that signifies utilization and care at the same time and thus eludes binary logics of these commonly thought oppositional practices. Nature and culture both co-constitute and merge through the practices described. Practices that rarely follow regulated patterns of either care or utilization, but unfold in idiosyncratic projects that are not intended for the site, but result from the multiple human-place relationships.

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