

In the Midst of the Revolution: The *Rond-Point* as Media of Contention

Lutz Robbers

When in November 2018 the *gilets jaunes* movement began to flare up all over France, an often overlooked yet ubiquitous element of infrastructural design gained surprising prominence: the roundabout or *rond-point* as the new locus of political contention. The unprecedented mobilisation of people devoid of participation and visibility in established public spheres defied not only the institutionalised forms of political protest. They also snubbed the traditional spaces of political representation: the centrally located public open space, usually a square, plaza, or market place. Contrary to other recent protest movements which perpetuated the traditional localisation of the political in central urban locations (for example Tahrir Square and the Egyptian Revolution, 2011; Zuccotti Park and Occupy Wall Street, 2011; the Place de la République, and Nuit debout, 2016), the *gilets jaunes* movement shunned the urban centres. Instead, in acts of open defiance towards conventional spaces of political representation, demonstrators relocalise the political inside the peri-urban landscapes of a postindustrial capitalist society.¹ Perplexed by the novelty of the political movement the roundabout was soon designated, for lack of a better term, the agora or forum of the present era.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the political agency of this element of infrastructural design, which, since the 1980s, has become a ubiquitous feature of urban planning across the French *territoire*. Doesn't the fact that the *gilets jaunes* seem to choose the peripheral roundabouts as their

preferred sites of political contestation – while ignoring the square in the town centre – attest to a proverbial political unconscious? What makes the centres of the roundabouts amidst the informal peri-urban space such attractive mediators for the political causes of the *gilets jaunes*? Doesn't the fact that thousands of yellow vests perseveringly chose to assemble at or on roundabouts require us to come up with alternative ways of thinking the spatial settings for the appearance, the representation and the practice of 'the political', the *res publica* or public matter?

Rather than perpetuating the idea of an idealised public space such as the agora, the forum, or the square, which because they remain void allow for processes of signification and symbolisation to occur, this essay attempts to comprehend the roundabout as a space of a new political imaginary in the sense of a medium or mediator. By media I do not mean instruments to project the (designing) subject's will onto the objective world. Rather, media should be understood as *dispositifs* or, as Reinhold Martin put it, 'systems that condition experience, delimit the field of action, and partition knowledge'.² How then, I will ask, does the roundabout as medium reframe political experience, action and knowledge?

My argument is split in three parts. The first part introduces the question of the roundabout as site of the political through a reading of the film *Trop tôt, trop tard*. In the second part, I argue that

the enthusiasm of modern architecture and town planning for roundabouts attests to an underlying comprehension of the urban – and, by consequence, of the political – as an uncontentious space where conflicts are managed and neutralised. And in the third part, I argue that the *gilets jaunes*, by occupying the void of the roundabout, they reclaim an original form of local, immediate, unrepresentative politics. By appropriating the *rond-point* they redefine this element of traffic infrastructure as an exemplary thing with which to think architecture as a matter of contention located at the crossroads between aesthetics and politics.

Too early, too late

The opening sequence of the experimental film *Trop tôt, trop tard* (1982) by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet might serve as a point of entry to illustrate my argument. In the beginning of the film, the spectator sees an uncut tracking shot, lasting more than five minutes, taken from an automobile continuously circling the Place de la Bastille in Paris, altogether seven times. [Fig. 1] Through the passenger window and against the urban backdrop, we see the other cars arranging themselves within the flow of the traffic circle, overtaking us, falling behind, moving away. As spectators, we – like the drivers who enter the frame and disappear from it again – become actors in a continuously rotating panorama. What becomes visible with every revolution is the play between the now converging, now diverging cars, as they strive to avoid the ever-present danger of collision. Remaining invisible meanwhile is the centre of the roundabout, the monumental *Colonne de Juillet*, the urban symbolic inscription memorising the storming of the Bastille in 1789.

Not without irony, Straub and Huillet show us the Revolution as a proverbial circumvention of the Bastille. The urban square, legacy of the classical agora or forum, was once regarded as the

quintessence of the localisation of the political. As a central, blank, empty space within the densified city it became an idealised scene for the staging of debates, demands, protests, and revolts, the spatial embodiment of an idealised public sphere. In contrast, Straub and Huillet frustrate the spectator's expectation: the Place de la Bastille is not represented as a symbolically charged square but as an infrastructural device. The camera-eye, rather than capturing the scene from a detached point of observation, becomes immersed within the urban apparatus. Blurring the coordinates of space, the movement of the camera-spectator-motorist engaged within the perpetual traffic flow preventing collisions between the atomised drivers. In the opening scene, space is presented as a form of flux dis-figuring and ultimately relieving the cityscape of its multiple symbolic charges. According to Jean-Marie Straub this space is

full of traffic, or engulfed in traffic ... But once upon a time it was a human space, for it was a public square and above it, on top of the column is the statue of the "Spirit of Liberty", which you don't see, because you're circling around it recounting how the bourgeoisie were always betrayers.³

As spectators-motorists we become aware that we just like our fellow-motorists are imprisoned inside isolated vehicles, perpetually turning in circles and being centrifuged away from the ultimately unknowable centre.

In this way, the tracking shot performs a transformation of the space of the Revolution. After more than two minutes of circulating at a constant pace, we hear the voice of Danièle Huillet reciting a letter from Friedrich Engels to Karl Kautsky. Not only does the letter describe the misery of the French peasants on the eve the Revolution, citing from the *Cahiers des doléances* (notebooks of grievances) compiled in 1789 from the consultation of

the different Estates.⁴ It also addresses Engels's Marxist historical understanding of the revaluation of the values of equality and fraternity.

Then it will be plain that the bourgeoisie was too cowardly in this case as always to uphold its own interests; that starting with the Bastille events the plebs had to do all the work for it ... but that this could not have been done without these plebeians attributing to the revolutionary demands of the bourgeoisie a meaning which they did not have, without their pushing equality and fraternity to such extremes that the bourgeois meaning of these slogans was turned completely upside down, because this meaning, driven to its extreme, changed into its opposite; that this *plebeian* equality and fraternity was necessarily a sheer dream at a time when it was a question of doing the *exact opposite*, and that as always – the irony of history – this *plebeian* conception of the revolutionary watchwords became the most powerful lever for carrying into reality this opposite: *bourgeois* equality – before the law, and fraternity – in exploitation.⁵

The space of revolution turns around, changes perspective, prompts its own re-evaluation. What is left of the powerful popular masses storming the Bastille in 1789 is the memory in the form of a monument placed at the rotary's centre, an invisible yet present void that can no longer be represented. We, as spectators and urban dwellers, are caught inside of the mesmerising revolution that assembles an atomised and mobilised public, a public collectively attracted and ejected one after another by a force at its invisible centre. Like the revolting plebeians, we as spectators are also always too early or too late: just when I see a fellow motorist approaching he or she is about to disappear; just when the intersecting of individuals prompts the possibility of recognising the other as equal, it turns into a sensation of loss. And just when we begin to recognise features of the urban environment to gain an image of the city, they

have already left the frame. In a sense, as much as *Trop tôt, trop tard* is an allegory of a class conflict that has failed, it is also an apt representation of media capable of successfully managing conflicts of both mobile inhabitants and images. Roundabouts and film seem to achieve the same thing: instead of perpetuating the revolution's failure of meeting the right moment in time, both act as mediators that render tangible the interval or threshold between things or images.⁶

Following the opening continuous six-minute delirium on the Place de la Bastille, the film changes its cinematographic form. Now we see slow panning and still shots of empty landscapes in France. [Fig. 2] Straub and Huillet present to view rural places such as Tréogan, Motreff, Marbeuf and Harville but also urban panoramas of Bayeux, Paris and Lyon. Devoid of all human presence, the French countryside has a 'science-fiction, deserted-planet aspect'⁷ to it. The idea of the film was to revisit the places Engels describes in his letter to Kautsky, places where the misery of the peasants were recorded on the brink of the French Revolution in the *Cahiers de Doléances*. All we see now are traces of human activity: fields, hills, trees, fences, near-deserted roads, buildings and villages in the distance. 'Maybe people live there, but they don't inhabit the locale',⁸ as the film critic Serge Daney described the scene. We hear birds, the wind and the distant humming of traffic – a soundscape repeatedly interrupted by Danièle Huillet's solemn voice reading from Engels's factual description of the pauperisation experienced by the local populations just before the Revolution.

The final take from these depictions of the French countryside that make up the first part of the film shows a fragment of a wall on which a red inscription is visible: 'The peasants will revolt 1976'. [Fig. 3] At the same time, the voiceover draws an analogy with the Paris Commune during the French Revolution:



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 1: Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, *Trop tôt, trop tard*, 1982, sequence of film stills.

Fig. 2: Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, *Trop tôt, trop tard*, 1982, film still.



Fig. 3

Fig. 3: Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, *Trop tôt, trop tard*, 1982, film still.

“Well-being for all on the basis of labour” still expresses much too definitely the aspirations of the plebeian *fraternité* of that time. No one could tell what they wanted until long after the fall of the Commune Babeuf gave the thing definite shape. Whereas the Commune with its aspirations for fraternity came too early, Babeuf in his turn came too late.⁹

‘Too early, too late’ becomes the recurring leitmotif for the montage of present and past, of image and voice, of experience and memory. Daney describes the imagery of Straub and Huillet as ‘the shot as tomb’, a cinematographic representation of a conflict that contains what must remain invisible: ‘The content of the shot, *stricto sensu*, is what it hides: the bodies under the ground’.¹⁰ The difference between what we see and what we hear, what we perceive and what we know can never be resolved. In fact, it is the absence that is constitutive for attesting a historical truth – an argument reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s description of Eugène Atget’s photographic documentations of empty Parisian streets as ‘scenes of crime’.¹¹ Both Atget’s and Straub/Huillet’s documentations are ‘evidence on historical trial’, demanding ‘a specific kind of reception’ from the viewer – namely the ability to comprehend the image (or the landscape) as ‘prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images’.¹² It seems that Straub and Huillet are driven by the very same conviction as Benjamin, namely that the estrangement between man and his/her environment will have a salutary effect. Through the bodily and material immanence of the material world (mediated through photographs, films, or architecture) an unconscious knowledge of the past is actualised in what Benjamin famously called the ‘now of recognizability’.¹³

Voided of its signifying elements, it is the landscape that seems exempt from the too early/too late dilemma of all revolutionary struggles while still assuring the correspondences with the revolutionary past. Trees, clouds, grass, roads, houses,

the wind bear witness too of past crimes. Tellingly, Gilles Deleuze called the films by Straub and Huillet exercises in ‘stratigraphy’ inferring vanished layers of history that cannot be seen on the surface of the image, yet read as a “coalescence” of the perceived with the remembered, the imagined, the known’.¹⁴ In order to understand an event we need ‘to connect it to the silent layers of earth which make up its true continuity, or which inscribe it in the class struggle’.¹⁵

In *Trop tôt, trop tard*, this stratigraphic dimension is displaced in space and time. After the deserted French landscapes accompanied by Engels’s text, we see panning shots of the Egyptian countryside with the voiceover of Mahmoud Hussein, a contemporary author reading from his *Class Conflict in Egypt*.¹⁶ While the fields and streets are now filled with people, history repeats itself: the peasants revolt too early against Britain’s colonial occupation and succeed too late with the revolution of Naguib.

Hence, Straub and Huillet’s ‘radical materialism of the *mise-en-scène*’ (Rancière) aims at eliminating all elements of representation and replacing them with the delirious spectacle of the atomised motorist-spectator or ‘landscapes’ stratigraphic power of coalescing the past with the now.¹⁷ In both cases, representation is deferred, submerged or kept from view. Straub and Huillet perpetuate the modernists’ fascination with voids, absence and emptiness. The impressionist painter Gustave Caillebotte, for example, repeatedly captured the horror *vacui* prompted by the emergence of modern metropolitan infrastructures. *Un Refuge, Boulevard Haussmann* depicts an almost deserted traffic island in Paris from a vertical oblique angle. [Fig. 4] We see a flat, abstract void onto which isolated figures and objects are pasted. Whereas Straub and Huillet’s opening sequence frames the analogy between moving image and moving vehicle as an allegory for the endless deferral of the revolution (always simultaneously in a state of loss and becoming, at once too early and too late), Caillebotte depicts the



Fig. 4: Gustave Caillebotte, *Un Refuge, Boulevard Haussmann*, ca. 1880, oil on canvas, private collection. Source: Martin Schieder, 'Stadt/Bild. Gustave Caillebotte, Baron Haussmann und eine Verkehrsinsel', *Themenportal Europäische Geschichte*, 2015, www.europa.clio-online.de.

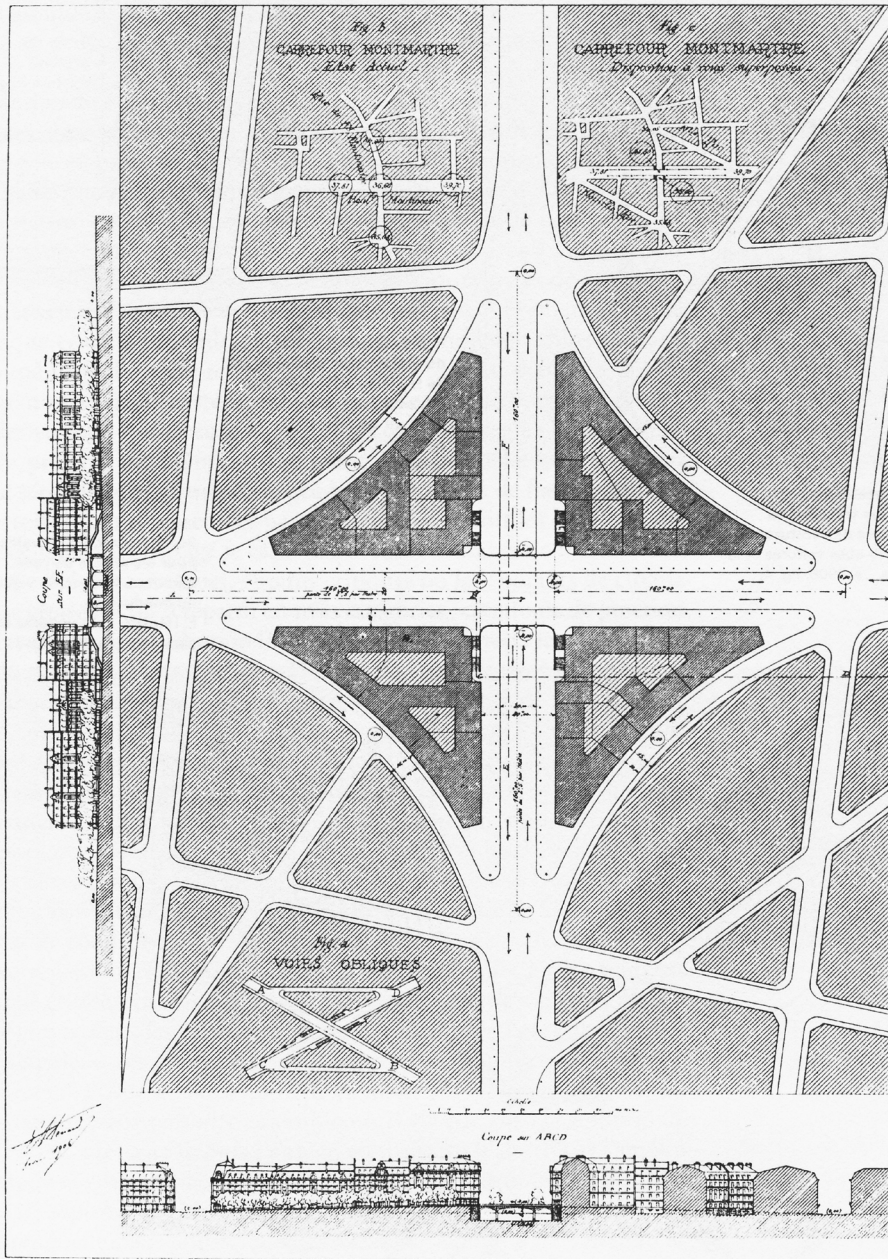
non-synchronicity of the urban dwellers with their urban surroundings prompted by Hausmannian modernisation. The urban stage is the roundabout, the new element of urban infrastructure onto which disparate elements are assembled: formally dressed yet anonymous passers-by, lavishly decorated yet mundane street lights and an amorphous massing of thick streaks of paint that might be identified as a pile of rubble or a construction trench. Here the flattening of urban signifiers turns into an instance of immanence by connecting the viewer to the silent layers of earth. The urban soil or material debris offers the viewer a sanctuary from the dislocating and anaesthetic experience of the metropolis – just like the roundabout became a refuge for the pedestrian of the modern city from the threat of onrushing vehicles.

Avoiding conflict

In *Trop tôt, trop tard* the urban centre is no longer the locus of the political. Despite its political subject – revolutions in France and Egypt – the film shuns the visual representation of urban space. One would expect the urban to be the natural habitat of the public sphere, the space where diverse actors co-exist, gain representation and interact, where subjects voluntarily expose themselves to the unknown and the unexpected – as Richard Sennett has argued.¹⁸ If the idea of the public sphere ultimately resided in its capacity to generate and arbitrate conflicts and if urban space, by definition, is the product of these conflicts,¹⁹ Straub and Huillet suggest that the conflicts can no longer be represented on an urban stage and that they have migrated to the countryside. With the site of the political shifting, the urban realm's capacity to articulate and integrate the Other by coming together in contentious and conflictual ways wanes. The proliferation of practices of urban management seems to have rendered the idealised existence of public space as 'a community based on unresolved dispute' all but redundant.²⁰

Historically, the development of the roundabout happened independent of and in opposition to the enclosing town square as a centralising and symbolically charged urban locus. Circular forms and radiating lines first appeared in Renaissance town planning and landscape design. Especially forests, privileged hunting ground for royalty, transformed into spaces of representation and spectacle.²¹ In order to control amorphous nature, land surveying methods were used that laid out radiant lines from a central point of observation in order to cut linear swaths through the vegetation. These points of observation became the first *ronds-points*: gathering sites for hunting parties facilitating the scenic witnessing of the hunting events and being easily accessible by carriage. It took until the eighteenth century for the geometrical figure of the central circle from which numerous straight lines emanate to enter the formal vocabulary of urban planning. Already at this moment, the tension between its form and its operational function becomes apparent. For example, the Parisian *places royales*, designed as an enclosed space of representation (with the equestrian statue of the king at the centre facing the surrounding harmonious facades) against the informality of the circumjacent urban fabric, was soon regarded solely as a useful means for facilitating street circulation.²²

With the introduction in 1903 of the term '*carrefour à giration*' by the French architect Eugène Hénard this dialectic resolved in favour of its operational agency. The *rond-point* lost all representational functions to become a technological apparatus for the management of single-direction traffic flow around an isolated central island. With the intensification and acceleration of movements of people and vehicles, the urban intersection was increasingly regarded as a dangerous zone of conflict. The advent of automobiles further enhanced the risk of accidents. 'Because the problem emerged through the encounter between two intense currents of



PLAN D'UN CARREFOUR
A VOIES SUPERPOSEES

Fig. 5: Eugène Hénard, *Carrefour à voies superposées*, 1906. Source: Eugène Hénard, *Les Voitures et les passants Carrefours libres et carrefours à giration* (Paris: Librairies Imprimeries Réunies, 1906), plate III.

circulation, we will suppress the cause of the conflict by letting one current pass on top of the other', Hénard argues and proposes – like Cerdà and Olmsted before – a *carrefour à voies superposées* (junction with overlapping lanes).²³ [Fig. 5] The alternative solution was the *carrefour à giration* or roundabout. Here the centre of the intersection must remain void, or rather filled by a barrier or obstacle that the automobiles cannot surmount. In his drawings for a *carrefour à giration*, a rotational intersection, the *plateau central* appears as an open, circular area around which traffic flows in one direction. [Fig. 6] Through the continuous movement of the vehicles, the 'points of conflict' disappear.

Hénard's propositions to transform the conflictual intersections into technological apparatuses for the efficient, accident-free distribution of traffic flows are part of a longer history of urban infrastructural management of people, objects and vehicles.²⁴ Already in 1909, Hénard's ideas inspired Unwin and Parker's planning in Letchworth, hence bringing the roundabout to suburbia where it has become a distinguishing design element until the present day. Hénard also prepared the ground for modernist urban planning's penchant for the functionalist engineering of smooth and uninterrupted processes. The Athens Charter with its strict separation of housing, work and recreation from traffic infrastructures marks the triumph of a non-conflictual modernist urbanity. The roundabout became the *dispositif* par excellence to perform the rupture with the traditional city and its propensity for pedestrian-level interactions. In Le Corbusier's urbanistic thinking, the roundabout functioned as an essential design element for implementing his machinist vision of an unfettered urban organism. Convinced that 'the crossing of streets is the enemy of the circulation',²⁵ already for his 1922 project *Contemporary City for Three Million Inhabitants* he envisioned implementing superimposed traffic circles. [Fig. 7] The roundabout as technological *dispositif* supersedes

the ways a conflictual urban public space traditionally helped inscribe political meaning or allowed political practices to emerge. Instead, the automobile inhabitants, while uninterruptedly moving on sinuous roads, experience the city as a cinematic spectacle 'organized by an architecture which uses plastic resources for the modulation of forms seen in light'.²⁶

Similarly, the 1929 competition to transform Berlin's Alexanderplatz into a true *Weltstadtplatz* inserted this modernist penchant for infrastructure and flow into the (re)planning of the urban centre. The competition brief demanded from all participants to conform their proposals to the demands of the movement and the density of car traffic. An essential part of the brief was the installation of a roundabout with a diameter of fifty metres.²⁷ Accordingly, the winning entry by Hans and Wassili Luckhardt completely subordinated architectural form to the shape and experiential potential of the roundabout: the composition of horizontally structured, glazed facades envelope the vast circular and dark void at its centre, integrating the uninterrupted traffic flow of bodies and vehicles into the reifying commercial spectacle of the metropolis. [Fig. 8]

By deliberately violating the competition brief Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's design offers an alternative proposal. [Fig. 9] His composition of altogether eleven office buildings demonstratively refuses to subordinate architecture to the primacy of a purely functional infrastructure. By treating both independently, his project shields architecture from being 'raped by the traffic'.²⁸ Mies rejects the demand to subject the metropolis to the functionalist demands of the present and the 'brutal violence' with which traffic has affected the 'organisms of our cities'.²⁹ At the same time, the 'image of the city' (*Stadtbild*) created by Mies, as the editor of the Werkbund publication *Die Form* Wilhelm Lotz argues, is not something that is composed of

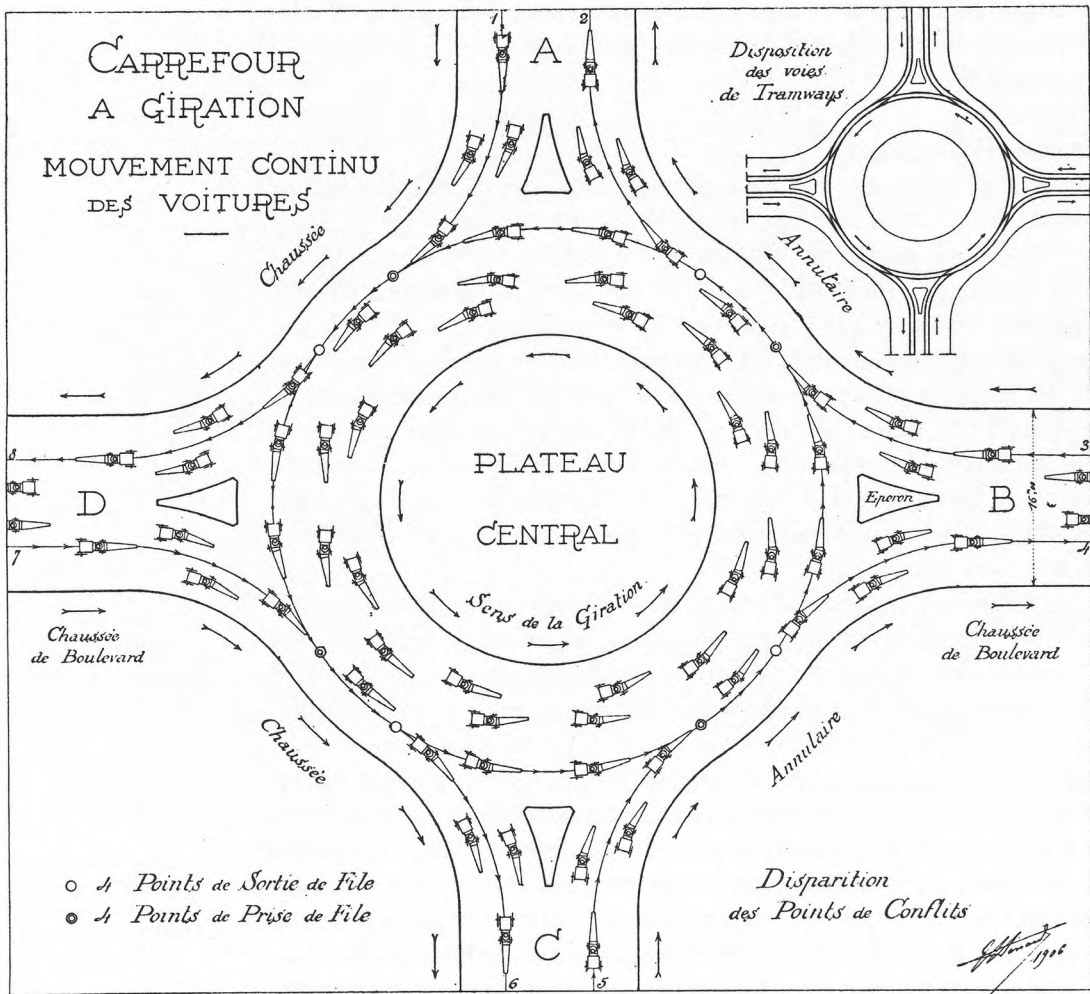


Fig. 6: Eugène Hénard, *Le carrefour à giration*, 1906. Source: Eugène Hénard, *Les Voitures et les passants Carrefours libres et carrefours à giration* (Paris: Librairies Imprimeries Réunies, 1906), fig. 9.

'scenic pictures' (*Schaubilder*).³⁰ In other words, Mies's Alexanderplatz proposal fails both as representation of the new infrastructural paradigm and as representation of a symbolic order.

Mies's roundabout in the heart of Berlin is neither an instrument of functional, infrastructural urban design nor an idealised modern agora for the resolution of the dialectical conflict between form and flux, architecture and traffic infrastructure. Rather, it perpetuates a montage of incongruous elements that interrupts and interrogates all conventional solutions. If the Miesian roundabout deliberately rejects the role of stage for the political, place for a monument, and even as infrastructural residue, what role does it play? The Heideggerian notion of *Lichtung* or 'clearing' could be helpful.³¹ Contrary to an empty space that awaits inscription allowing 'scenic pictures' to appear or acts as 'a fixed stage with a permanently raised curtain on which the play of beings enacts itself', a clearing 'itself encircles all beings – like the nothing that we scarcely know'.³² Perceived as a *Lichtung*, Mies's roundabout is no longer a void within urban spaces filled with signification, but an 'illuminating centre' (*lichtende Mitte*) that rather than being illuminated through symbolic inscriptions or functional attributions becomes itself an unknowable 'happening' that cannot be represented or observed.³³

Just as the modernist filmmaking of Straub and Huillet eliminates all elements of representation and displaces conflict onto a stratigraphic plane, Mies presents us with an urban landscape as a passage that leaves contradictions between form and function, past and present, architecture and infrastructure unreconciled. Being always too early or too late might have been the tragic shortcoming of the revolutions. It is the hidden structural virtue of cinema and, one might argue, of the roundabout.

What appeared to Hénard as the solution to a traffic problem is transformed by Mies into the

precondition for a new experience of space. The *gilets jaunes*, who were socialised in this space of the automobile, occupy the voided centre of the roundabout precisely because it lacks symbolic signification and it has the potential to act as a *Lichtung* that fundamentally alters the political. In the roundabout, the place of the revolution is no longer the symbolically charged centre where the conflicts are acted out and presented to view. Instead, the centre, once the locus of power and meaning, becomes an invisible mediator of this new mobile spatio-visual order facilitating the traffic flow and assuring the prevention of collisions and conflicts.

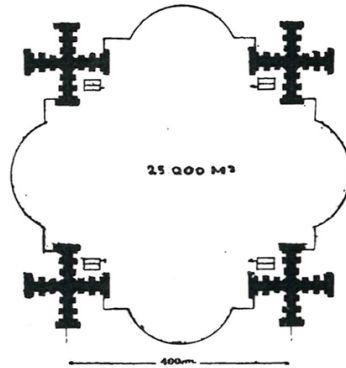
Occupying the void

In an interview, the French intellectual Alain Finkielkraut calls it 'touching and suggestive' that the *gilets jaunes* chose as sites of protest the roundabouts located at the peripheries of French cities, converting them, as Finkielkraut put it, 'into genuine agoras and forums'.³⁴ [Fig. 10] Yet he appears flabbergasted not only by the unprecedented nature of the social movement – spontaneous, informal and devoid of a coherent political programme and representation. He also seems surprised that of all places, they chose roundabouts as the preferred sites of contestation. The fact that the overlooked populations of *France périphérique* occupy those empty spaces created by the flow of traffic, which must remain blank in order to avoid concrete conflictual collisions, testifies to the yellow vests' well-developed political consciousness.

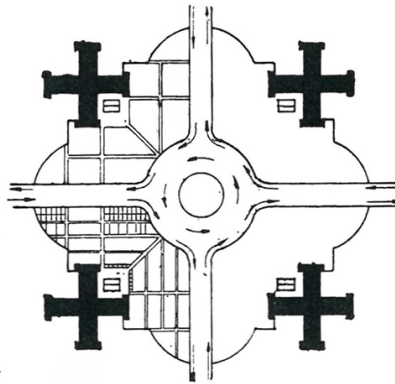
Finkielkraut's casual use of terms like 'agora' and 'forum' is of course charged with a number of assumptions. Both terms appear as spatial manifestations of the political and preconditions for democracy to take place. In Greek antiquity, it is on the agora as the classical space of assembly where the demos is formed in a 'clash of discourse' and 'debates that take place in the assembly'.³⁵ Here, collective self-awareness is generated symbolically

GARE CENTRALE.

Plate forme supérieure
GARE D'AVIONS



1^{er} Etage
GRANDE CROISÉE
AUTOS RAPIDES



Rez de Chaussée
ACCÈS AUX LIGNES

- Métros
- Banlieue
- Grandes Lignes

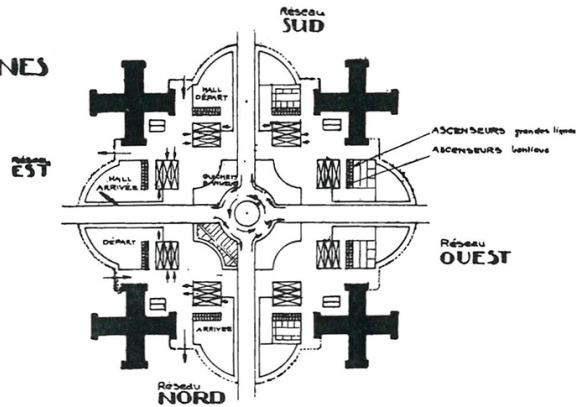


Fig. 7: Le Corbusier, *Central Station, Contemporary City*, 1924. Source: Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme* (Paris: Éditions G. Grès et Cie, 1925), p. 172.

(albeit temporarily) through the initiation of formal speech within an open space free of inscriptions, usually taking the form of a circle or a semicircle.³⁶ The speech must concern public affairs relating to the community, which in turn is constituted through the right to speak. Only later, these assemblies of the common became associated with buildings and monuments representing divine or state power. First, it was the Greek temple that functioned as a public space and became 'a property of the city'.³⁷

It is this attitude towards free space for the temporary inscription of speech that distinguishes the *gilets jaunes* from other protest movements. Whereas *Occupy Wallstreet*, for example, although seemingly similar to the *gilets jaunes* in their anarchist refusal to recognise the legitimacy of political institutions,³⁸ targeted particular symbols, spaces and monuments associated with the political adversary, the contention of the *gilets jaunes* appears to be first and foremost concerned with occupying a void – as a precondition for the political to emerge. Instead of expressing their political discontent by taking to the urban stage – performing institutionalised appeals to political representatives or assailing the symbols of reigning powers – the yellow vests seem to reinvent that stage altogether.

In that sense, the political spatial practice of the *gilets jaunes* and their unconscious predilection for peri-urban traffic circles fundamentally differs from the 'roundabout revolutions' Eyal Weizman recently analysed.³⁹ The examples Weizman refers to – most notably Tahrir Square in Cairo, Manara Square in Ramallah and the roundabout in front of a government building in Gwangju, South Korea – are all centralising parts of a symbolically inscribed urban fabric. He explains the seemingly obvious correlation between revolution and roundabout by their being located at a 'single pivotal point within a networked infrastructure' which can easily be exploited by the protesters to interrupt the flow of traffic.⁴⁰ The occupation of these roundabouts hence appears

to follow the customary script of urban protests: protesters challenge the symbolic powers in place by first deactivating the infrastructural functions, transforming the space of passage into a political stage.

By contrast, the *gilets jaunes* neither disturb the flow of traffic, nor do they rebel against symbolically charged monuments or sites. They appear to choose the peri-urban roundabouts for their assemblies precisely because of their lack of signification. The motivation to gather amidst the *terrain vague* of the automobile cluttered with fast food outlets, big box supermarkets, logistics warehouses and uniform housing estates – in fact, the *gilets jaunes*' very own lifeworld – resides less in their desire to block circulation or to compel a visibility usually denied to them. Rather than engaging in and hence recognising the existing symbolic order through antagonistic rites of contention they practice an immediate, (re)localised *Ur*-form of politics. The political scientist Laurent Jeanpierre has identified within the *gilets jaunes* movement a rejection of a 'scholastic bias' of the dominant strata of society. Instead, the *gilets jaunes* embrace forms of speech that 'unfold in the name of lived and shared experience'.⁴¹

By exhibiting their political presence exempt from all ideologies, symbols, representations and visions of a future to come, the *gilets jaunes* embrace their local postindustrial landscapes as their 'living social context'.⁴² By inserting themselves into the concrete infrastructural devices responsible for managing flows of people and things and hence for avoiding conflict, the *gilets jaunes* recuperate the space of the political beyond antagonist contention and the politics of representation. And by doing this, they not only gain visibility as a protesting demos – which the traditional urban stage of political representation denies them. Their immediacy also renders visible the way such urban devices as the town square or the roundabout operate as mediators.



Fig. 8

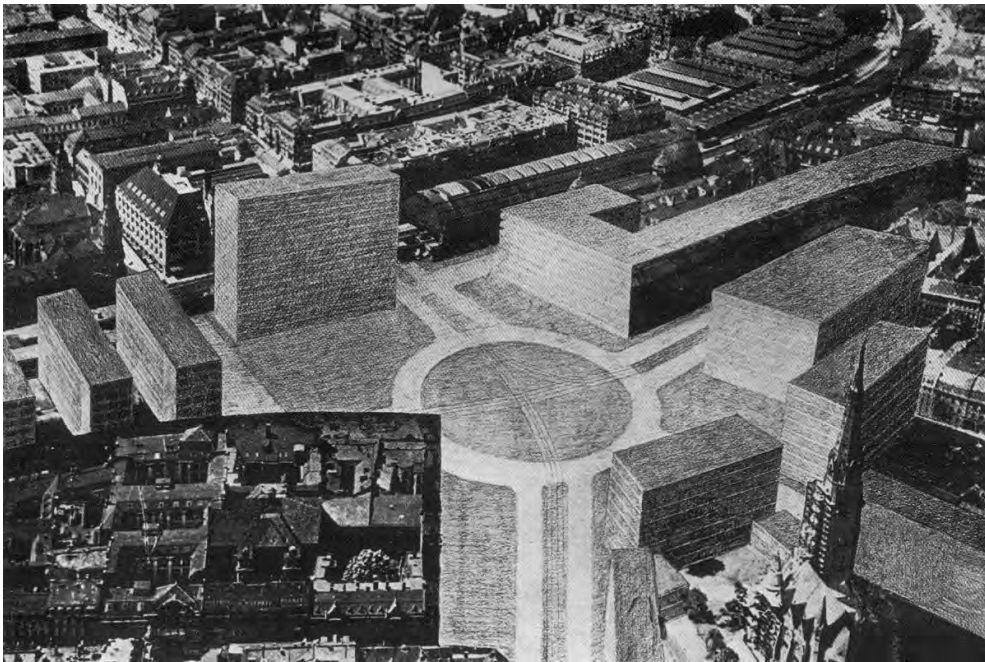


Fig. 9

Fig. 8: Hans and Wassili Luckhardt, *Alexanderplatz competition*, 1929, photograph of model. Source: *Die Form* no. 6 (1929): 131.

Fig. 9: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, *Alexanderplatz competition*, 1929, photomontage. Source: *Die Form* no. 8 (1929): 211.

The peri-urban roundabout might just be the blind spot of the all-pervading neoliberal spatial regime of control. It is a last refuge for those outside of the reigning systems of representation and power. The fact that roundabouts usually either remain empty or are decorated with either pop-cultural trivialities or well-intentioned exemplars of public art attests to the impossibility of integrating this infrastructural device into a conventional production of symbolic meaning. It is maybe for this reason that the official guidelines by the French *Ministère de l'Équipement* concerning the design of the circular space of the roundabout remain rather vague. The traffic island should receive a 'landscape and architecture treatment' and should be inserted into the 'urban landscape'.⁴³ Among countless decorative installations with varying degrees of artistic ambition, installations that treat the specificity of the peri-urban head on are rare. *Rotating House* (2008) by the artist and architect John Körmeling is an exception. It presents a replica of a typical Dutch row house on a roundabout outside the city of Tilburg. [Fig. 11] Placed on tracks, it circles around the roundabout every twenty hours, prompting an effect of estrangement in drivers seeing the house at changing locations.

Hence, what draws the *gilets jaunes* to the traffic circles? One possible explanation might just be that traditional symbolic representations and attempts to affirm political agency by entering discursive fields in codified practices of contention (like joining political parties, participating in an organised demonstration, engaging in acts of disobedience, writing op-ed pieces) seem to fail in late capitalism. The threat to the established order no longer resides in inscribing oneself in or altering the symbolic order. Rather, as Éric Alonzo suggests, the menace to the contemporary para-urban order consists in disrupting the flux of its fragmented infrastructural networks.⁴⁴ Power is no longer expressed and executed by 'putting things in place' through acts of naming, ordering, or displacing. Power in today's decentring urban

world is condensed in roundabouts as media that function as the nodes for managing the movement of people and goods. Occupying the centre now means displaying their bodies in the empty void of these nodes that defy representation.

Then again, the protest of the *gilets jaunes* were rarely about blocking the flow of traffic as Weizman and Alonzo suggest. Rather, their actions rendered visible and re-defined the urban episteme of the roundabout. We become aware that they are media that delimit the field of what can be seen or imagined to certain kinds of urban perceptions and political actions. Or, following the terminology introduced by Jacques Rancière, the programmatic and spatial void of the roundabout demonstrations challenges the 'police' assigning the individual to classes, functions, identities and liberating 'politics' in the sense of the irruption of a voice exceeding all communitarian rooting.⁴⁵ The voices of the *gilets jaunes* – epitomised by the generic safety jacket that affirms the affiliation to a uniform collective – institute what Rancière calls '*la part des sans-parts*', the partaking of those outside of the dominant social and symbolic orders who refuse representation and identification.

The plebs of the *rond-point*, 'those who have no part' enter not only the political/peri-urban stage to be counted as equals. They also remind the dominant public of the old urban centres that they still exist. In addition, more importantly, by occupying the peri-urban traffic circles, by claiming new sites of conflict, they expose the roundabout as one of today's sophisticated media for managing potential conflicts in order to guarantee the smooth flow of transactions. Yet once we understand the roundabout beyond being a functional device for traffic management as medium it gains agency to reframe the ways in which both the political and the urban can be known, experienced, and built. It is 'a piece of a material complex that is both a way of knowing the world and a thing to be known in its own right'.⁴⁶



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Fig. 10: *Gilets jaunes*; photo: www.lechorepublicain.fr, 7 December 2018.

Fig. 11: John Körmeling, *Rotating House*, installation, Tilburg, 2008. Photo: Gerda van de Glind.

In the midst of the roundabout – the urban apparatus par excellence to prevent collisions – the *gilets jaunes* affirm the persistence of the political and the necessity of spaces of contention. They remind architects and urban planners that the link between the demos and the polis lives on yet emerges in surprising places. Architecture must assist in enabling people to partake in a socially distributed sensuality. Even if too early or too late, the people still claim their part in the polis.

Notes

1. Laurent Jeanpierre, *In Girum: les leçons politiques des rond-points* (Paris: La Découverte, 2019), 97–98. Marc Augé, for instance, identified the roundabout as 'a revenge of the local'. Marc Augé, 'Roundabouts: The Revenge of the Local', in *City A-Z*, ed. Nigel Thrift and Steve Pile (London: Routledge, 2000), 206–7.
2. Reinhold Martin, *Mediators: Aesthetics, Politics, and the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), viii.
3. Cited in Elke Marhöfer and Mikhail Lylov, 'A Thousand Cliffs' (Interview with Jean-Marie Straub), in *Der Standpunkt der Aufnahme: Positionen politischer Film- und Videoarbeit*, ed. Tobias Hering (Berlin: Archive Books, 2014), 348.
4. In reaction to the wave of protests by the *Gilets Jaunes* movement, the French President Emmanuel Macron initiated the *Grand débat national* on 15 January 2019. This orchestrated exercise of direct consultation on a local level was supposed to produce 16 000 *Cahiers de doléances* documenting the political demands of French citizens.
5. Letter from Engels to Kautsky, 20 February 1889, in Friedrich Engels, *Friedrich Engels Briefwechsel mit Karl Kautsky*, ed. Benedikt Kautsky (Vienna: Danubia Verlag, 1955), 233. English-language source: Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), 482.
6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Le Cinéma et La Nouvelle Psychologie', in *Sens et Non-Sens* (Paris: Les Éditions Nagel, 1948), 98.
7. Straub quoted in Serge Daney, '*Trop Tôt, Trop Tard* de Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet', *Libération*, 20 February 1982.
8. Daney, 'Cinemetorology'. The above-mentioned source translated by Jonathan Rosenbaum and published on his website, 21 March 2018, <http://jonathanrosenbaum.net>.
9. Letter from Engels to Kautsky, 20 February 1889, in Engels, *Briefwechsel mit Karl Kautsky*, 234. François-Noël Babeuf (1760–1797) was a French revolutionary whose newspaper *Le tribun du peuple* advocated equality, the interests of the poor and the abolition of private property. Babeuf was arrested and executed in 1797.
10. Serge Daney, 'Une Morale de La Perception', in *La Rampe: Cahier Critique 1970–1982* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 127.
11. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction [Second Version]', in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Thomas Y. Levin and Brigit Doherty, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 27.
12. *Ibid.*, 27.
13. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 867.
14. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 245.
15. *Ibid.*, 254–55.
16. Mahmoud Hussein, *Class Conflict in Egypt: 1945–1970*, trans. Alfred Ehrenfeld (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974). See also Celine Condorelli, 'Speaking of Revolutions: Too Early, Too Late: Interview with Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet', *LUX*, 9 March 2011, <https://lux.org.uk>. It is worth noting that in an early letter to Kautsky, Engels reflected on

- the potential of revolutions to occur in colonised countries such as Egypt. See letter of 12 September 1882. Engels, *Briefwechsel mit Karl Kautsky*, 63.
17. Jacques Rancière in Philippe Lafosse, *L'étrange cas de madame Huillet et monsieur Straub: comédie policière avec Danièle Huillet, Jean-Marie Straub et le public* (Toulouse Ivry-sur-Seine: Ombres À propos, 2007).
 18. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1977), 39.
 19. Spiro Kostof, *The City Assembled: The Elements of Urban Form through History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 124.
 20. Panu Lehtovuori, *Experience and Conflict: The Production of Urban Space* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 36–40.
 21. Éric Alonzo, *Du rond-point au giratoire* (Marseille Lyon: Éd. Parenthèses É. du Certu, 2005), 15–16.
 22. Alonzo, *Du rond-point*, 40.
 23. Eugène Hénard, *Les Voitures et les passants Carrefours libres et carrefours à giration* (Paris: Librairies Imprimeries Réunies, 1906).
 24. Alonzo, *Du rond-point*.
 25. Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme* (Paris: G. Crès, 1924), 161, my translation.
 26. Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow and Its Planning* (New York: Dover, 1987), 178.
 27. Paul Westheim, 'Umgestaltung des Alexanderplatzes', *Bauwelt* no. 13 (1929): 312.
 28. Ludwig Hilberseimer, 'Würdigung des Projektes Mies van der Rohe', *Das Neue Berlin* no. 2 (1929): 39–40.
 29. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, unpublished manuscript dated 17 March 1926, included in Fritz Neumeyer, *Mies van der Rohe: Das kunstlose Wort* (Berlin: Siedler, 1986), 315.
 30. Wilhelm Lotz, 'Wettbewerb für ein Bürohaus am Hindenburgplatz in Stuttgart', *Die Form* no. 4 (1929): 153.
 31. The term *Lichtung* refers to a glade or opening in the forest. Etymologically, it also connotes 'illumination' or 'enlightening', which can be understood as an act of elucidation or loosening up. In Heideggerian thought *Lichtung* does not stand in opposition to the metaphysics of light. Leonardo Amoroso, 'Heideggers "Lichtung" Als "Lucus a (Non) Lucendo"', *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 90 (1983): 154.
 32. Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. and ed. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 30. 'Diese offene Mitte ist daher nicht vom Seienden umschlossen, sondern die lichtende Mitte selbst umkreist wie das Nichts, das wir kaum kennen, alles Seiende'. Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950), 41.
 33. Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, 31.
 34. Interview with Alain Finkielkraut: 'Macron bezahlt jetzt den Preis für seinen Sieg', *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, 1 February 2019, <https://nzz.ch>.
 35. Patrick Brasart, *Paroles de la Révolution: Les Assemblées parlementaires, 1789–1794* (Paris: Minerve, 1988). Cited in Marcel Detienne, 'Public Space and Political Economy in Early Greek Cities', in *Public Space and Democracy*, ed. Marcel Hénaff and Tracy B. Strong (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 45.
 36. *Ibid.*, 44–45.
 37. *Ibid.*, 51.
 38. David Graeber, 'Occupy Wallstreet's Anarchist Roots', in *The Occupy Handbook*, ed. Janet Byrne and Robin Wells (New York: Back Bay Books, 2012), 141–49.
 39. Eyal Weizman, *The Roundabout Revolutions* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015).
 40. *Ibid.*, 12.
 41. Laëtitia Riss, "'Le mouvement des Gilets Jaunes a permis d'être un peu moins malheureux'" – Entretien avec Laurent Jeanpierre', *Le Vent Se Lève* (blog), 26 January 2020, <https://lvsl.fr>.
 42. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 769.
 43. Éric Alonzo, *Du rond-point*, 109–10.
 44. *Ibid.*
 45. Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente* (Paris: Galilée, 1995).
 46. Martin, viii.

Biography

Lutz Robbers holds a PhD in the History and Theory of Architecture from Princeton University. He has taught at the RWTH, Aachen, the Bauhaus University, Weimar, Columbia University and Princeton and has held research positions at the IKKM, Weimar, the London School of Economics's 'Cities Programme' and the German Forum of Art History in Paris. He served as managing editor of the journal *Candide – Journal for Architectural Knowledge*.