

## Text by Anja Schürmann

**»A current of organic life surges from these communal groups – which share a common destiny – to their ornaments, endowing these ornaments with a magic force and burdening them with meaning to such an extent that they cannot be reduced to a pure assemblage of lines.«  
(Siegfried Kracauer)\***

The Mass Ornament by Siegfried Kracauer also has a connection to the artistic work of Ursula Damm. Her design of the Schadowstraße U-Bahn station can be roughly divided into two parts: First the passerby is received in a space outfitted in blue glass tiles. On the tiles are 21 aerial photographs of Düsseldorf's land registry showing the city in maps corresponding to their compass points. There is a detail of Golzheim in the northern part of the station, in the south you can see Bilk, and so on.

The artist subjected these maps to a geometrical process, which is rendered as a guide to the station: starting from the main traffic arteries the streets are axes of movement to other streets in a geometric ratio, enclosed by a surface with several corners – a polygon. From these polygons the angles and axes form larger, more symmetrical polygons that can be used to aid the different sections of the map. With these large structures, Damm attempts to create a relationship between the two-dimensional surfaces, like parks or housing blocks, on the maps to link the abstract structures back to the »energy centers which have adapted to each other during the development of the urban architecture.«

The centerpiece of Turnstile is a large LED screen on the tunnel level, stretching between two light shafts and connected to a video camera located above ground on Schadowstraße. It is there that the data for visualization is collected: real-time movements of passersby are filmed and transmitted to the screen and are then collected as a statistical mean. People can also interact with a polygon here, the direction of their movements has the capability of disrupting the stability of the geometric forms. In this way, the connections between passersby are re-established and reach beyond to be further considered and calculated.

Schadowstraße and its U-Bahn mark a turnstile where the greatest concentration of traffic meets in the city center and the most people are transported in any number of ways; whereas the second part of the word turnstile points simultaneously to a tile, a panel. On this screen there is the perspective of things being seen rather than what is seen, in the sense of concentrated layers, so that the original collection of data remains abstract and yet perceptible. The operation follows the thesis that in addition to what is constructed in urban centers there exists yet another form of architecture, fed by the energetic footsteps of passersby, their short-term relationships and their movements. The geometric forms seen on the LED screen refuse to understand the people as a mass and to assume their behavior is predictable, because they develop individual, non-repeatable gaits. On the empty spots of the most frequented locations created by the space designed by the software. From here, centers are identifiable, marked in white and constantly seek out new, flexible points of contact to other centers. The result is a virtual architecture that is always adaptable to interact with the people who use the space. Similar to Vitruvius, the ancient architectural theorist, here, man is the measure of all things. Yet, it is not a static, rather a moving, person that Damm has in mind to reverse the hierarchy of built-up and utilized urban space.

As a counterpoint and correction of a hegemonic narrative, the artist offers an alternative count on several levels. The design asks if it's possible to generalize individual behavior, as a person of distinct perspectives, and transfer them into parameters which correspond to swarm movements. And, does the way we move in public space have consequences for larger structures, for architects or for entire neighborhoods? Are urban structures at all anthropomorphic, in that they resemble human behavior? If so, then every step is safe or reasonable, because every step structures, marks and – thus the instructions at the station are only logical – takes on a creative role.

\* Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1995. p. 76.