



With a Wink of the Solar Eye: Revisiting the Performance Life & Strive

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Solar Güz Kırpış: Life & Strive Performansını Yeniden Düşünmek

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Abstract

In 2010 Anat Eisenberg and Mirko Winkel conducted the performance work "LIFE & STRIVE" in one of İstanbul's most luxurious high rise residencies. The participants were invited to face a real-estate investment from the buyers perspective; they joined tours to the "Sapphire" that were guided by professional salesmen, in front of whom they posed as a group of wealthy and potential buyers, while the artists took on the role of their agents. The work treated the sales experience as a performative exchange and invited the participants to enjoy the deception in which they were complicit. The article describes the development process of this performance work and reflects on the experiences.

Keywords: vertical gated communities, residences, Sapphire, İstanbul, performance work, Life & Strive

Özet

2010 yılında Anat Eisenberg ve Mirko Winkel İstanbul'un en lüks güvenli gökdelen rezidanslarından birinde LIFE & STRIVE isimli bir performans çalışması gerçekleştirdiler. Performans çalışmasında yer alan katılımcılar bu yeni konut alanlarını bir alıcının gözünden deneyimleyeceklerdi. Katılımcılar, varlıklı potansiyel alıcılar rolünü oynadılar ve bu kimlikleri ile profesyonel satıcıların rehberliğinde "Sapphire" turlarına katıldılar. Bu arada, sanatçılar da bu potansiyel zengin alıcıların temsilcileri rolünü üstlendiler. Performans çalışması satış deneyimini performatif bir değişim olarak değerlendirdi ve katılımcıları suç ortağı oldukları bu aldatmacanın keyfini çıkarmaya davet etti. Bu makale söz konusu performans çalışmasını anlatmakta ve deneyimleri irdelemektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: dikey güvenli siteler, rezidanslar, Sapphire, İstanbul, performans çalışması, Life & Strive

Preface

What is so intriguing about urban places and the objects that are located therein are the vast number of stories they hoard. The quality of a brick may disclose the financial condition of the house builder. The shape of a street lamp may reveal who holds the authority over a territory. A road network may inform about the underlying natural terrain, but also about different schools of city planning throughout the various decades and centuries.

The philosopher Michel de Certeau writes in *The Practice Of Everyday Life*, about the panoramic view of the city as seen from the perspective of a skyscraper. He compares this view with the perspective of a pedestrian that uses much more unconscious navigation. He then describes the resulting perception of the city: "Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body" (Certeau 1988: 108). A panoramic view is therefore in fact a potential stream of a billion undiscovered stories, in which you can immerse yourself anywhere to find out the details. It is possible to instantly stop and continue somewhere else without following any sequences.

Exceptional elements in the continuum of these narrative surfaces are solitary manifestations. For example the skyscraper apparently stands out from its surrounding by its shape, material, name, and usage. These objects seem to be detached from the narrative stream as their isolation suggests a "great story" in itself. They dominate the space by indicating a beginning and an end. In reverse, the surrounding amorphous area becomes defined and structured by these pillars. Seemingly the city becomes readable with the help of such landmarks. Nevertheless, with all their architectural imposing nature, skyscrapers still remain in a multifaceted relationship with their environment and conditions. They are not only autonomous superstar bodies, but are surrounded by people who ascribe meaning to them, maintain them, imitate or even ignore them. It is worthwhile looking at these peripheral processes and protagonists, to understand better how this story works.

The following article describes the developing process of *LIFE &*

STRIVE and experiences with the artistic work that Anat Eisenberg and Mirko Winkel conducted in İstanbul, in 2010.¹

Introduction

We have experienced İstanbul as a city that changes at a high speed and occupies a critical geopolitical junction. Standing in extremes, İstanbul is quite particular in the world. Yet, it is also full of cultural traces from all continents. This is coupled with rapid flows of migration from all directions (within, towards and away from the country) and between social classes. For instance, İstanbul's upper classes are not composed of urban cosmopolite elites anymore. As the middle classes have expanded exponentially, some of the protagonists have climbed the ladder and reached political and economic power. Suddenly values that were considered conservative started to gain popularity.

Whether conservative or not, these upper classes and the new rich groups live in visually distinctive gated communities. This is not only a matter of lifestyle and prestige but also about the protection of the (newly gained) privileges from envious and from the chaos of the uncontrollably growing city. This results in an excessive need for safety that creates a big industry by itself. These safe communities act according to many security factors: Entrance controls, internal monitoring systems, rules of conduct for residences, earthquake safety, and so on.

In İstanbul, gated communities have been conveniently located outside of the city center with excellent connection to the highways. Yet, in the past few years, a new housing phenomenon appeared which may well become the successor model: the inner city residence towers. The developers target younger families and singles that don't want to move back to their parents' home after having studied abroad, and foreign investors. Another targeted group is the elder couples whose children left the house and who got tired of their villa outside the city, which they now see more as a summerhouse. A recent trend is the capitaliza-

¹ LIFE & STRIVE is a performance work by Anat Eisenberg and Mirko Winkel. It took place in İstanbul between 18th and the 23rd October 2010 and lasted two hours. The documentation is in form of a brochure and a video, from which the images in this article are captured.

tion of new urban-natural hybrid concepts with the intention of combining nature and high-tech into the inner city compounds. To compete with the romantic, healthy-living, close-to-nature, far-from-distractions and children-friendly life-style promoted by suburban villa marketers, the inner city towers have to include solar panels, tree plantation and of course a fabulous view of the sea.

Idea

The existing social discourse about gated communities and new wealth either exoticizes them by looking at them with admiration or keeps a verbalized distance as something that is never personally reached, or even rejects them as a phenomenon of decadence. With our project, we were interested in finding ways to create a personal dilemma. We wanted to create a situation where it is not merely about *distancing*, but about *over-affirmation*. Over-affirmation, according to Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse (2006: 445) is "An artistic/political tactic that allows [...] to take part in certain social, political, or economic discourses and affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them. It is characterized precisely by the fact that with affirmation simultaneously there is taking place a distancing to, or revelation of what is being affirmed."

We were invited to develop a work for the IDANS Festival. The festival lasts several weeks and shows mainly guest performances of European artists in the field of contemporary dance and Performance Art. It was the only performance work that was developed on site in relation to the local environment and issues. We took one month to become familiar with the city, making contacts, talking to experts and developing the work.

Flying from Berlin with Turkish Airlines, we had the opportunity to explore the various current luxury projects advertised in the on-board magazine. We wanted to see these apartments for sale with our own eyes, so we made a long list with everything we found. During our first requests by phone we were immediately asked for the pur-

pose of our visit and soon we realized that if we were to continue with our strategy of saying: “we want to research for an artistic work”, we would not get very far. Therefore we decided to pose as agents who have the task to make prior visual inspections for our (also made up) European clientele, who are looking for profitable investments in the growing İstanbul market. That role gave us the opportunity not only to visit a lot of projects for sale, but we were even taken so seriously that we got fed with numerous internals by the sales office “colleagues”. For example, we were told about planned, but still unpublished, neighborhood improvement measures, as many of these high-end towers have been constructed in lower income areas. We were even informed about the specific percentage of those buyers who wear a headscarf. The sales experts told us also about the nationalities and names of other international buyers. We received a handful of background information when sales people wanted to dissuade us from competing projects. That is how we found out about planning mistakes, how the projects actually sell and even under which dubious circumstances the money for the construction of some buildings was acquired.

In the course of 2 weeks, we visited a large number of projects. Here is a selection (Figure 1):

- Rixos Residences Bomonti
- Elysium Fantastic
- Alkent 2000
- Anthill Residence
- Maçka Residences Armani Casa
- Varyap Meridian
- Rixos Elysium Suites Taksim
- Trump Towers
- İstanbul Sapphire

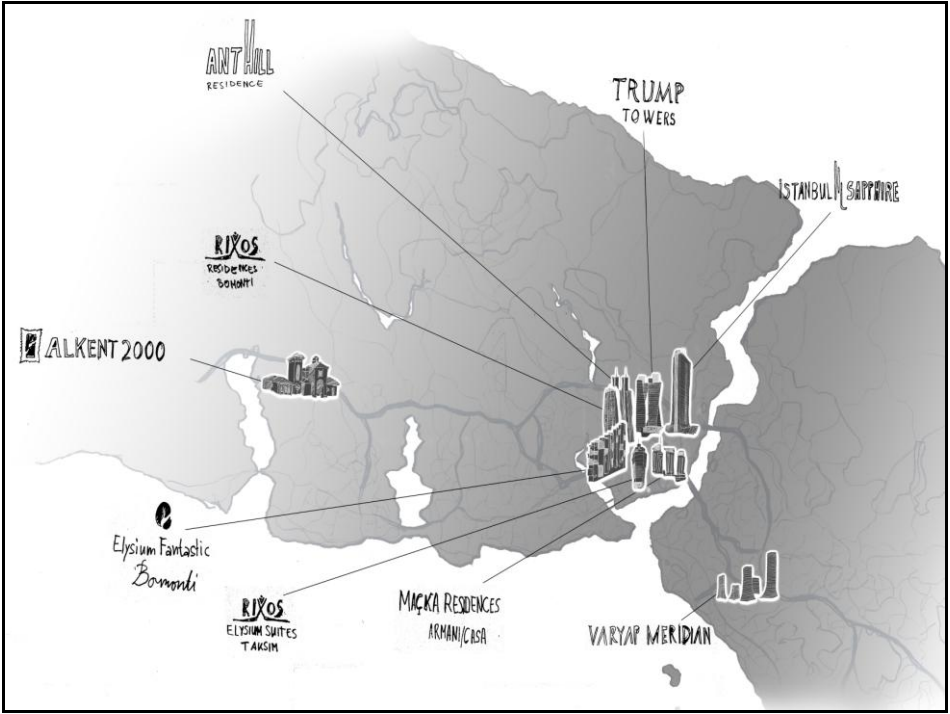


Figure 1: The map of luxury gated projects visited in İstanbul

The most prominent project we encountered was Sapphire of İstanbul (Figure 2). At the time of its construction it was the highest skyscraper in Europe. The investor is the company named Biskon Yapı, which belongs to the Kiler Holding. Kiler Holding operates Turkey's largest supermarket network and has experienced a growth of more than 50% during the period of AKP government. Nahit Kiler, the company's chairman, longed to develop the Sapphire, a project that flags a combination of the neighborhood principle of his eastern Anatolian home village with the idea of a luxurious high-rise building. Sapphire was designed by Tabanlıoğlu Architects, an architecture firm responsible for Kanyon, Levent Loft and Zorlu Center.



Figure 2: Sapphire of İstanbul. From promotional image.

In order to be taken seriously enough as agents, we dressed up and prepared our roles for the assigned task, so we knew how we should act properly (Figure 2). Nevertheless, we found ourselves again and again in delicate situations. For example, when we accidentally asked inappropriate questions that may have revealed our intentions or when we were asked questions about our background. We were surprised that several times after leaving, the sales people checked the genuineness of our names and our clients. However, each time we visited a site, we improved our vocabulary and embedded the collected information into our conversations. We also understood that it was almost impossible to go inside with a theater audience. The only people who can enter a planned gated community (apart from being an official guest with an invitation) are potential buyers. So we developed the following idea: The audience

will be smuggled in small groups into the respective investment project for sale under the fictitious claim that they are solvent and interested customers.

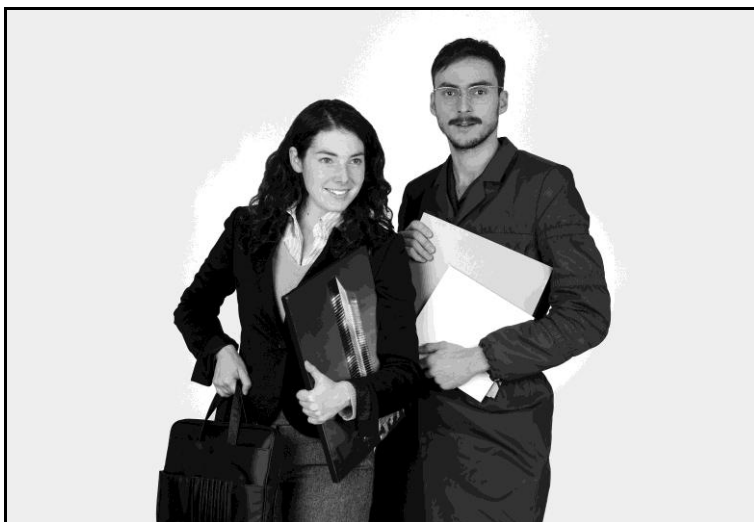


Figure 3: Anat Eisenberg and Mirko Winkel posing as professional European sales agents.

Execution

Within the İDANS we announced six performances within consecutive days in the second week of the festival. Each performance was open for 15 participants with a prior registration. The participants were loosely informed that the work they are about to view deals with residential towers. The performance started at the top floor lounge of the luxurious Marmara Hotel of Taksim Square. Anat Eisenberg and I introduced ourselves to the participants and gave an introduction to the topic of gated residential towers in İstanbul. Through the panoramic view we could point at all the recent developments, ending with the highest building in construction, which was already completed from outside, the Sapphire. The participants were informed about the condition of posing as a group of wealthy potential buyers to get into this building. They were asked to pretend in front of a salesperson that they are able to afford and are seriously interested in buying an apartment between 2 and 25 million US

dollars. Participants who refused to join this role-play were asked to leave. Surprisingly everybody decided to participate. We explained the participants that we, the artists, are not only the initiators of the performance but are also acting as the agents for our clients, for whom we had arranged an appointment. A car was waiting for the participants outside the hotel to transport us to the Sapphire construction in the financial district. During the 30 minutes car ride, we prepared the participants for possible scenarios and constructed with them their made up identities. They were asked to rethink their individual role or to create a character, a biography, to consider the group identity and the internal relations, or to think of strategies in case of direct confrontation.

When we arrived at the Sapphire, we went to the entrance gate in the building site fence where a security guard asked for our names. After confirming our arrival through his walkie-talkie, a suited guard appeared from the building to collect us and bring us into a dark entrance hall where we had to wait. A sound signal from the elevator indicated that the elevator boy had arrived. We were all standing inside the fast elevator, holding our breath to arrive into the lobby lounge area. We were escorted to the reception desk where, after a short while, the responsible salesperson welcomed our clients and us as their sales agents. The clients were asked the types of drinks they would like to have. We sat down on one of the lounge sofas. After engaging in a little small talk, the salesman gave us an introduction into the building.

We found out that the project consists of 64 floors (54 above-ground and 10 basement floors), communal living floors, extensive parking spaces and a high-end shopping mall in the style of a large oriental bazaar. After our coffee had arrived, we walked to an architectural model of the building. Supported with light effects, the sales person described that, like the lobby floor we were currently on, there is a special recreation floor, at every 9th floor of the building, like a pool at a height of 60 meters and an indoor golf course at a height of 160 meters. Some participants, in their role as interested clients, asked questions, for example, about the function of the lobby floor. So we had a closer look. The salesperson explained:

Where we are standing now is 6,000 square meters of social activity area, as we call it. It is only accessible to apartment owners, people like you, company bosses and CEO's. There is no outside entrance to our project. It contains the lobby lounge area with our sociability sitting units, the bar unit, library unit, multimedia room with a plasma screen and three meeting rooms. So, if you suddenly need to talk business, you don't have to go upstairs to your apartment. Just walk in and use this area as your own.²

After walking around, the sales person suggested looking at a sample apartment of which some of them were already completed. We went back into the elevator, which was decorated on all sides from top to floor with poster print that showed a night view of the city captured from the building. The salesman noted that the building, in his words "the project", is built on a swimming construction and that if an earthquake measuring 9.0 takes place, the whole city would be razed to the ground, while sapphire would remain standing still.

After arriving to the entrance of the apartments, we had to put on some plastic covers to protect our shoes from possible dust. One by one we stepped into a machine that wrapped the blue protectors around our shoes. There were four different design themes to choose from for the apartments' interiors: *Summit* "the cool one", *Lava* "the glossy one", *Earth* "the secure one," and *Magma* in passionate gold and bright colors.

As we visited several rooms the salesman opened the terrace doors to show us the ecological element of this project and explained:

Your residence will have an integrated private garden with fresh air. It will also have a double facade system, with two layers of glass. Inside the apartment is an indoor garden with an artificial climate. The air is fresh so you feel that you are stepping outside. The inside temperature will be regulated by our smart computer system and stays all-year-round on a certain degree because of the automatic transparent curtains that change according to the direction of the sun. They protect you also from external urban noise. This is the first ecological building in Turkey, with garden units and energy saving concept.³

² Quotation of the salesman is taken from a recording that we made during one of the tours under the pretence that we needed a memory aid for our clients.

³ *ibid.*

On the last floors of the building, there are only penthouses with gardens that could only be seen by the apartment owners. In the lower parts of the building are three apartments next to each other with their own gardens. On top of them are two floors, each with three balconies. That means that nine units share the same air and can also possibly see into the others' garden. The salesman compared this to single family houses in the countryside, which are next to each other (the horizontal principle). In the case of Sapphire they are flipped upright (the vertical principle) (Figure 4). The salesman continued to explain the rules of using these common private gardens:

If you are an owner of an apartment with a garden, you are responsible for ensuring that the garden is well kept. This is particularly important because your neighbors will see your garden. If you do not take care of your garden, we will do this for you, but we will charge you for it because your neighbor needs to see this beauty as well. You don't only live by yourself; it is like a community here. Show respect and they will show respect to your beauty as well.⁴



Figure 4: The group in the inner garden. In the back are the gardens of other apartments and the balconies of the floor above.

⁴ *ibid.*

Then, we had a look at a bathroom, equipped with a TV hidden just below the mirror surface. We received a detailed explanation about the “smart house system”; a computer based interface. With this one could control electricity, temperature, light, the entryway camera, communicate with the house service, order food from the restaurants and so on. There is a regular maintenance fee that the occupants need to pay which covers some of the available services.

Later on, we went to the rooftop, which was set to function as the theatrical peak of the performance. The salesman compared the view from there to the satellite view of Google Maps. Everything appeared small. One could see from there the whole site, the Bosphorus, the Asian side, the Princes’ Islands and even the Black Sea. The salesman said: “Sapphire will become the Empire State Building of İstanbul.” We didn’t stay too long, and we didn’t talk much here. These minutes were leading to the last part of the performance – the price negotiation.

Back in the lobby lounge, equipped with another coffee, the sales person asked us for our preferred apartment size, and if we were interested in finding out the prices. His assistants handed him floor plans and a complex diagram which explained the still available apartments and how the pricing is determined by several factors: Big versus small apartment; Bosphorus versus Belgrade Forest view; lower floor versus higher floor; indoor garden versus indoor balcony. (The first one mentioned is always the expensive one). At this point, each of the six groups we took during the different days reacted differently. Sometimes the participants just listened to the salesman who explained how many millions one apartment costs, while, in other moments, individual participants asked a lot of questions about the pricing policy and then started to negotiate, to see how much their preferred apartment would cost. This was an extremely tense moment for the group since the role-play had to go quite far at this point. In such moments, Anat Eisenberg and I, as their assistants, took over the conversation and we said that we have to leave now. In that case, the salesman quickly exchanged contacts with the interested parties, handed over business cards, information bags with prospects and floor plans. Then, we quickly left.

Standing outside the building, it always felt like a relief and the driver was actually waiting to take us back to Taksim Square. During our drive

back we had the chance to exchange some words about the absurd experience we all had recently shared. This was always a truly fascinating moment.

Thoughts

Besides of all the information presented by the sales-office, there were also some details that had to be discovered between the lines. For example, some particulars about the usual clientele were amongst them. It sounded as if the average clientele was probably male living in a traditional family structure. While walking through the building, the salesman integrated a lot of humor into his sales speech hoping to connect with us. We were laughing at his jokes out of politeness, whether understanding them or not. These jokes showed prejudices about women and were to some extent boastful. One audience member found a cookbook in the example kitchen for the “devoted housewife.”

The participants in *LIFE & STRIVE* experienced an intriguing dilemma. On the one hand, they were pretending to be wealthy investors looking for an excellent deal. Yet, on the other hand, they were ordinary people looking at the entire project and the procedure with astonishment or suspicion. To find out more and get more as a participant they had to be more proactive as performers themselves. They brought themselves into complicity by recreating the cliché of how they consider a rich person to behave. It was fascinating to see that many participants, from the moment they took on their roles, behaved not as a group anymore with a common mission, but much more as individuals with independent interests. Many of them demonstrated arrogant and hypercritical traits. It is difficult to say whether this showed the “inner rich” hidden in them or whether it pointed to existing stereotypes, or whether this was a way to let the existing criticality towards such construction projects shift into this new role. A lot of people described confusion afterwards, not only about what they just have seen and done but also about the question of what might have been performance or theatre in this experience.

Nicola Conibere (2011: npa) writes in her paper about the work:

Peter Hallward has noted a parallel between theatre's creation of a stage whose contents are constantly reconfigured and whose performers occupy multiple places and identities, as apparatus serving the moment of political disruption in which place is reconstructed and people's roles changed. Hallward says '[b]y refusing to speak in their own name, by acting at a distance from themselves or imitating the action of another, actors and poets threaten the very foundations of authority itself.' This is not simply an affront to the Platonic ideal, but an act that demonstrates a becoming 'other'.

This act of pretense is more powerful than generally assumed. If we look for instance at American rappers or Arab sheikhs and their notion of wealth or rather the lifestyle they appropriate when they make money we may ask who their role models are. *What happens if a financially potent supermarket-chain owner gets the idea to create a luxury tower where he wants to live with his friends and like-minded people? How may this look? How do buildings that are built as objects of speculation look?*

Only in limited terms does *LIFE & STRIVE* render visible something that has previously been invisible, because we can all recognize luxury; we already know what it looks like. Images of luxury are in wide circulation and, importantly, are typically produced by the people who have access to it. As such, *Life & Strive* offers a kind of reframing of these existing images by changing the way its spectators experience them (Conibere 2011: npa).

Through this event, we offered to understand and reflect on gated communities from the logic of a possible inhabitant. If you actually would decide to move into the Sapphire, you may have to sign an agreement of 100 pages that describes what kind of behavior is permitted and what kind is not. That was presented, not as restricting policy, but as something that ensures that your neighbors not only share your social class but also act like you. For example, you are not permitted to barbecue in the inside garden and thus pollute the air you share with eight other neighbors. The underlying idea is to create a self-governed community, which sets off and floats above the unregulated world that surrounds it. It is like a heterotopic world within a world construction. According to the architects each of these projects function like an experiment because it was built on assumptions of behavior. Sapphire, for example, is designed like a five-star hotel. A huge army of staff, including

cleaning people, concierge service, and a chef, are available 24 hours for different services. Whether these will answer the actual needs and habits of the future residents, is yet to be proven when “life starts” in the building, as coined by the salesman.

On the other hand, it must nevertheless be said that gated communities have existed since the 1980s, even though with a different orientation. Unlike countryside-gated communities, the fence and protection walls of the residential towers are more or less invisible. The sensitive possessions are, in this case, indeed visible for everybody but simply not reachable because of the enormous height. So does the protection fence transform into the outer shell of the tower? The German architect Gottfried Semper, who lived in the 19th century, saw the origins of architecture in textiles. The etymology of the German word for wall, *Wand*, has the common root with *Gewand*, meaning dress. Inside and exterior walls are made for dressing the body of the project. If we accept that analogy, what does it mean for a double glass shell facade? Is it a bulletproof business shirt or rather a crystal high heel?

I should perhaps note that we divided the tours into Turkish and English tours. This decision was made not only for communication reasons but also because we found out that the simulated realness of being wealthy and that the consequent convincing performances of our participants played a crucial role for the transformation process. During our preparation period, we worked together with a style advisor and a life coach, who were to prepare our participants for their roles. But soon we realized that this might shift the focus too much towards the construction of the role. We experienced rather that identity construction happens anyway in a performative process by interacting and testing out personal borders with the salesperson. During our preparing talks with sales people, we heard that it is relatively easy for these people to identify if a prospective client has enough money or not, at least within the Turkish clientele. International buyers are harder to locate, as codes of attitude and dressing are not the same everywhere. That was the second reason why we separated the groups, so we could prepare the people differently. We communicated this to our participants.

We wanted to address the performative act of pretending to be someone else in front of a third party. It seems interesting to find out how this

differs from someone who actually is in the state of being wealthy and expected to be treated like this. How much role-play is involved in when someone has to show how much money she or he has by accumulating status symbols and by showing distinct behavior to people of a different income group? Or to which extent is it the behavior of the people around a rich person that authorizes specific manners and in reverse brings the other one to behave as expected? We all may know the situation in which a staff member in a hotel or in a restaurant treats us with extreme politeness. We may feel uncomfortable, but won't say that we don't like it. We will respond in a way the waiter expects us to behave. Interestingly enough in none of our performances did a participant leave the role or did something entirely unexpected. However, let us return to the subject of role-formation. Whether it is the interaction that creates one's own status or it is the personal action of self-entitling, both use a similar performative procedure that *LIFE & STRIVE* generates in an artistic context.

Execution Version II

Now, I disclose a secret that we did not share with our participants beforehand.

The whole experience in Sapphire was staged. We worked together with the sales department to create this two-hour lasting experience. With them, we developed a dramaturgy. We chose an appropriate sales person and decided upon what may be said and how to behave in some situations of potential confrontation. To get to this point, we had to work together with the architects and get the consent of Kiler to work with this building and the staff for one week.

While the participants were thinking that they had deceived the salesman and played a role for him, the salesman, in fact, was the one who had performed for them, knowing about their play. Consequently everybody was playing for each other - a situation that is pretty close to actual sales situations, where you can never be sure about the others' identity and intentions.

To collaborate with the house in that way was also practical. Coming several times with such a large group could have easily raised suspicion and the viability of the performance would have been in danger.

We tested how the experience differed in cases when the sales people were informed about our “real” identity and in cases they were not. In both cases, the experience for the participants was almost similar.

We decided not to inform people in advance, because we wanted participants to engage themselves fully with the event.

“For me, any force [...] lies in the playfulness inherent in the invitation that Life & Strive extends. The pretence involved is not about sacrificing one’s sense of true self; it’s about playing along. In *Aesthetics and its Discontents* Rancière identifies the presence of politics in acts of play because of ‘its adherence to a sensorium different to that of domination.’ [...] I don’t want to suggest that Life & Strive offers a path to permanently insinuate ourselves into this particular brand of living in luxury. Rather, by setting up an event in which all the audience has to do is play along, it enables them to experience a reconfiguration of space and order that previously said this place was inaccessible to them. Perhaps, then, this work carries the potential for its spectators to regard other places or ways of being previously considered inaccessible, as open to them through a simple, and theatrical, act of pretence. Perhaps this is one step on a pathway to social reorganisation.” (Conibere 2011: npa)



Figure 5: View from an apartment of Sapphire

“His [the pedestrian’s] elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts his at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more” (Certeau 1988: 92).

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Mirko Winkel: lives and works in Berlin. He studied Visual Art and Performance Art under Marina Abramovic and completed his MA at the University of Arts in Solo/Dance Authorship. His works are research-based and take on many forms, ranging from performance, video, and dramaturgy to text, idea and advice. He co-founded the Mysafir Agency (make yourself an artist friend - in reality) at the 9th İstanbul Biennial. Currently he works on a film about the rebuild of the old city castle in Potsdam that is supposed to host the parliament. He is also part of a team that develops Protein, a magazine about the process of aging. He teaches at the Institute for Performative Arts and Education at Braunschweig University of Art.

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