

A photograph of two people from behind, standing in front of a wall covered in graffiti and drawings. The person on the left is wearing a camouflage jacket and a hood, and the person on the right is wearing a dark jacket and a bag. The wall is covered in various drawings, including a cat, a dog, and a car, and text in different colors and styles. The title text is overlaid on the image in a large, bold, yellow font.

if walls could tell East-Central European Perspectives on Participation

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Imprint

Editorial

Zoran Erić, Mischa Kuball, Dorothee Richter and Simone Voigt

The central focus of this issue is based on a proposition by Mischa Kuball via the idea of how a possible new position of the artist as catalyst, and concurrently the curator as mediator, could emerge in an art-world saturated with celebrity culture where art institutions become landscapes of power and politics instead of contact zones and spaces for negotiation and exchange. As simple as it was, the idea of placing blank white walls in public spaces of different cities, symbolically referring to the concept of a gallery or museum's white cube gives free access to the citizens to make their imprints on these walls and thus exercise their right to publicly comment on the issues that concern them.

The cities and countries we have selected share a common history of socialism in the post WWII period. To an extent, it is a stereotype of Western perception that these socialist countries were “monolithic” behind the Iron Curtain, invented in the period of Cold War. It was exactly the opposite, most cities are from Yugoslavia, the country that did not belong to the Eastern Bloc and was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement. Only Moldova was part of USSR, while Romania had a very peculiar position and was not in the epicenter of Soviet influence as opposed to other countries from East-Central Europe, a very useful geographical distinction by art historian Piotr Piotrowski. He insisted that a “romanticized” image of the region had to be replaced by an analytic approach to each socialist country and its social system with all its particularities. To this end, he introduced the methodology for approaching the specific context of each country with the concept of *framing* to counteract the universalist perspectives, or Western hierarchical interpretative model. Through these lenses, the artistic context of East-Central European countries was positioned on the periphery without appreciation of the differences in the semiotic and ideological spaces where the art was produced. In spite of very different social transformations in the post-socialist period after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Romanian Revolution in 1989, as well as anti-Yugoslav wars starting in 1991 that ended in dissolution of the country, Piotrowski's methodological tools for comparative analysis of the cultural and political context and all the nuances in each of the newly formed nation-states is still worth considering. While Romania, Slovenia and Croatia are already for some time EU members, North Macedonia and Serbia are in a very turbulent and complicated phases of accession, and Bosnia and Herzegovina only recently received the “candidate status”.

In these quite different situations, we have now introduced white walls – walls which, of course, are not neutral in themselves, but rather carry with them a promise of (unfulfilled) universality and (im)possible equality. Whilst Brian O'Doherty, in “Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space”, has already denounced the white cube as a place of pseudo-neutrality and commercial exploitation, here the white walls are brought out into the open, without shedding all their connotations. The empty white walls created an inviting, open, uncensored, yet largely pre-formulated space for a restrained form of expression, with the potential to give rise to a collective work of art from a polyphony of voices, drawings and graffiti. But perhaps, in the moment of collective action, the conversation about art, participation, and the political and eco-

conomic situation was the true work of art? This issue is dedicated to this idea and the process by which it was realised – albeit with contextual differences – in seven cities and countries across the region.

Central to understanding how this project works and how this theme is shaped is the specific artistic position that we have defined as that of a catalyst. Mischa Kuball's role in this project was not that of an author speaking in the first person, but rather that of a catalyst who creates a fixed practical framework whilst leaving the content of expression to those who engage with it. Acting as a counterpoint to the paintings on the white walls are, in particular, the contributions of the respective local curators and artists, who speak to participatory projects. This catalytic position differs from what Grant Kester, drawing on Adorno and Horkheimer, identifies as 'false immediacy', in which an attempt is made to abandon the space of representation in favour of direct political intervention. Kuball does not abandon the discourse on art, but strategically redistributes it by constituting the city as an arena and public space as a discursive field.

As previously mentioned, this takes place simultaneously on two different levels: on the one hand as the articulation of citizens, often surprisingly formulaic yet enriched with local knowledge, and on the other hand the artistic and curatorial contributions on panels. The latter reflect the respective possibilities and discourses within and through art.

This position generates a specific challenge and responsibility for the curator. If the artist functions as a catalyst, the curator's role becomes one of mediator, building the networks of trust that allow the project to take root in each local context, facilitating the panel discussions in collaboration with the involved partner institutions that translate public inscription into civic dialogue, and holding open the space between the project's conceptual frame and the unpredictable reality of what citizens actually write, draw, and paint. The curatorial labor in a project of this nature is largely invisible in the finished work, which was precisely the point. It consists of sustained relationships, institutional negotiations, ethical attention to whose voices are amplified and whose are not, and the willingness to accept that the project will take different forms in different places and that failure could be an inherent part of participatory artistic practice. This understanding of the artist-curator relationship, catalyst and mediator, shapes the editorial structure of this issue as much as it shaped the project itself.

The selection of cities, Sarajevo, Bucharest, Skopje, Chişinău, Ljubljana, Kraljevica, and Čačak, and partner institutions in them, was not chosen as representatives of a region that forms a kind of cultural touring map through Southeast Europe. The selection grew organically from Zoran Erić's longstanding connections in the region, developed over years of collaborative work, combined with the artist Mischa Kuball's own institutional relationships and the network cultivated by Simone Voigt, director of the Goethe-Institut Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo, whose role was indispensable in giving the project its initial momentum.

The map of the project's progression is also a map of trust, built upon a single idea but sustained over time between specific individuals and institutions, thus forming the core of a micro-art community. At the same time, it is a map that confirms a political reorientation of the region and the influence of the European Union. Nevertheless, a sense of unease persists.

What the selected cities share, however, is a specific condition that makes that trust both necessary and meaningful. These are cities where the relationship between cultural institutions and their publics remain genuinely unresolved and often contested. The public discussions constitutive within the project's idea were testing these exact sore points in each city and country. In Sarajevo, the future building of Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art, designed by Renzo Piano after a long period of waiting, has only a single foundation stone at the moment. The area connecting it to the Historical and National Museums, envisioned as a future museum quarter, is threatened by a planned road that would permanently isolate them from one another. In Chişinău, there is no dedicated contemporary art museum at all, and the independent cultural scene operates through improvised partnerships, basement galleries, and civic negotiation. In Bucharest, one of the largest cities of the region, the vital but polarized art scene was not willing to engage any longer in the discussion about the still visible remains of urbicide that the socialist regime and authoritarian leader "performed" in the city. In Skopje, the Museum of Contemporary Art sits physically isolated on a hill above a city saturated with nationalist bronze monuments erected under the ideologically aggressive "Skopje 2014" project, built on the fake identity interpolation of Slavic Macedonian people within the period of Greek Antiquity. In a small place, Kraljevica, near the industrial and port city of Rijeka, the historical Frankopan Castle created a secluded but potent venue for interaction with the local community. In Čačak, the project arrived in the middle of the longest wave of students' and citizens' protests Serbia had seen in decades, triggered by the structural collapse of a recently renovated railway station canopy in Novi Sad that killed sixteen people in November 2024. The ongoing civic unrest and blockades were strongly felt in the public space. In each case, the blank white walls did not enter a neutral but heavily burdened and contested space. (As publishers, we are aware that the complex history of East-Central Europe, with its many small states, can be difficult to grasp; we have therefore included a map with some information alongside the editorial.)

The project's consistent premise, that (un)filtered public expression, despite the art world's inherent mechanisms of exclusion, could catalyze genuine civic dialogue, was tested differently in each city. The texts gathered here emerged directly from those encounters. The issue moves between three overlapping registers: theoretical essays that situate the project within broader debates about participatory practice, commoning, and care aesthetics; curatorial and artistic reflections from contributors who engaged with the project at specific venues; and city-specific documentation sections, each combining a panel discussion proposal with invited responses from local voices.

The essay "Participatory Art as a Practice of Commoning" attempts to trace the intellectual genealogy of the project and situate it within debates about participatory practice, commoning, and care aesthetics, drawing on the curatorial experience of the full project journey. One of the project's strengths is that these claims are also put into perspective and, in some cases, refuted: Nebojša Vilić's skeptical account of "cloud culture" and institutional dissolution, Călin Dan's argument for the museum as Temporary Autonomous Zone, Predrag Živković's visceral account of what it meant to host the project in Čačak, while city officials monitored the walls from the windows of the municipal building. The essay by Blanca de la Torre brings a broader curatorial perspective, tracing participatory and ecological practices across multiple exhibition contexts and situating Kuball's project within a trajectory of socially engaged art.

The city introductions and panel descriptions, which frame each section of the issue, carry the specific socio-political context of the venue in question. They were written as curatorial proposals for the panel discussions held in each city, and they retain that character: partial, situated, oriented toward the urgent questions of each local context rather than toward any overarching thesis. To illustrate this, we have included visual representation of the numerous projects that were mentioned by the participants and, in some cases, curated by them. In art, we are always operating within a discursive field that creates the very subject of which it speaks.

The questions *if walls could tell* raise about public space, institutional responsibility, and the capacity of participatory art to build or repair social bonds are not questions exclusive to Southeast Europe. But they have a particular urgency here, in cities where those bonds were violently broken within living memory and where the institutions charged with holding cultural space open remain fragile, underfunded, and sometimes directly threatened by the political systems.

This issue thus occupies an uncanny position, a kind of “in-between” space within the editorial profile of the Journal. It is not a conventional thematic intervention in curatorial discourse, but closer to what the project itself produced on its walls: a layered, contested, sometimes contradictory record of what happens when art enters public space without a predetermined script and when curating accompanies that process with sustained attention rather than institutional control. All this gives an honest account on how an idea can evolve, and reimagine both the position of the artists and curator, as well as formation of organic institutional networks based on principles of solidarity and commoning in the arts. With this fragmented picture, we hope to reach out to other regions with multi-ethnic, multinational contexts where art operates in uncertain times.

Zoran Erić is an independent curator and Research Fellow at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade. He holds a PhD from the Faculty of Media, Bauhaus University in Weimar. His research fields include art theory, museology, human geography, urban sociology, and political ecology. He curated and co-curated numerous projects in Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Moldova, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the USA, etc. He contributed to different international art magazines and academic journals including *Artefact* (guest editor of the 4th issue *Glocalogue*); *Umelec*; *Manifesta Journal*; *Praesens*; *Third Text*; *A Prior*; *OnCurating* (guest co-editor of “Precarious Labor in the Field of Art”); *Hermeneia, Journal of Hermeneutics, Art Theory and Criticism* *Journal of Museum Education*; *Museum Management and Curatorship Journal*, etc. He published papers in edited volumes with the following publishers: Routledge, Springer, JRP Ringier, NAI Publishers, Phillip Editions, Sternberg Press, Hatje Cantz, DISTANZ Verlag, Revolver Verlag, etc. He was a member of the IKT Board (2005-2008) and the President of the Serbian Section of AICA (2008-2010). He serves on the scientific board of MNAC, Bucharest, and the advisory board of IVAM Valencia, and is a member of CIMAM.

Mischa Kuball has been working in the public and institutional sphere since 1977. From 2007 onwards Kuball has been a professor of public art at the Academy of Media Arts, Cologne, and from 2006 to 2008 professor of media art at Hochschule für Gestaltung/ZKM, Karlsruhe. Since 2015 he has been a member of the North Rhine-Westphalian Academy of Sciences, Humanities and the Arts, Düsseldorf. In 2016 he was honored with the German Light Award. Since the spring of 2024, he has been an associate member of the Cluster of Excellence 'Matters of Activity. Image Space Material' at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

Dorothee Richter is Professor in Contemporary Curating at the University of Reading, UK, where she also directs the PhD in Practice in Curating programme. She previously served as head of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating (CAS/MAS) at Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK), Switzerland. Richter has worked extensively as a curator: she initiated the Curating Degree Zero Archive and was a curator at Künstlerhaus Bremen, where she curated various symposia on feminist issues in contemporary arts, as well as an archive on feminist practices entitled *Materialien/Materials*. Together with Ronald Kolb, Richter directed a film on Fluxus: *Flux Us Now, Fluxus Explored with a Camera*. Her most recent project was *Into the Rhythm: From Score to Contact Zone*, a collaborative exhibition at the ARKO Art Center, Seoul, in 2024. This project was co-curated by OnCurating (Dorothee Richter, Ronald Kolb) and ARKO (curator Haena Noh, producer Haebin Lee). Richter is Executive Editor and Editor-in-Chief of OnCurating.org, and recently founded the OnCurating Academy Berlin.

Simone Voigt studied business administration at the Technical University of Applied Sciences Berlin as well as Russian Studies, Sociology and Political Science at the Humboldt University of Berlin and the Moscow State Lomonosov University. Following her studies, she headed the coordination office for the Robert Bosch Foundation's lecturer programs in Moscow in 1999/2000 and taught German as a foreign language at the Faculties of Journalism, Economics and Law at Moscow State Lomonosov University. From 2002 to 2009, Simone Voigt worked at the Goethe-Institut Moscow. She was first responsible for cultural programs and later for language course cooperation. After serving for a year as a lecturer for the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) at the Institute for State and Law at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, she returned to the Goethe-Institut Moscow in October 2010 and took over as head of the Press and Public Relations. In February 2016, she was posted to the Goethe-Institut Hong Kong as deputy director and head of language department. Since April 2021, Simone Voigt has been working as director of the Goethe-Institut Bosnia and Herzegovina, based in Sarajevo.

***if walls could tell* – The Birth of a Museum Community in Sarajevo**

Simone Voigt

On August 22, 2024 - just three days after the long-awaited ceremony marking the formal granting of the building permit, Mischa Kuball's project, *if walls could tell*, was launched at the future site of the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art in Sarajevo. Sarajevo served as the first of nine stops on this transnational tour, lending the event a unique symbolic weight and a certain historical dimension. This significance stemmed not only from the fact that the museum itself (represented here by three symbolic white walls) is yet to be built, but also because the installation served as a manifesto for the future of public space. The vision is for the area connecting Ars Aevi with the National and Historical Museums to evolve into a cohesive Museum Quarter. This vital space must be preserved and not - as is currently planned - be sacrificed for a major thoroughfare that would leave these institutions isolated from one another.

To mark the conclusion of the installation on September 11, the project curator Zoran Erić and the Goethe-Institut hosted the panel discussion "Public Art and the Limits of Cultural Participation." Focused on the central theme of increasing civic engagement within the city's arts and culture scene, the panel included: Senka Ibrišimbegović, Director of the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art Sarajevo; Elma Hašimbegović, Director of the History Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina; Mirsad Sijarić, Director of the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina; Benjamin Čengiđ, Head of the Gallery of Contemporary Arts Manifesto and the FASADA Street Art Festival in Sarajevo, as well as Damir Nikšić (Artist).

For the first time since the end of the Siege of Sarajevo in 1996, the heads of local and national museums joined forces with representatives of the independent art scene to publicly debate the future of their institutions. Together, they explored how artists and citizens alike can be integrated into the development of the city's urban landscape. By the end of the intensive two-hour discussion, there was a shared sense of optimism among the participants and the audience: this could be the beginning of a collaborative, "neighborhood-style" museum community centered on the interests of Sarajevo's citizens.

As a catalyst, *if walls could tell* has set a process in motion that the Goethe-Institut, in its role as a European cultural mediator, will continue to champion through the initiation of both local and international museum partnerships.

Simone Voigt studied business administration at the Technical University of Applied Sciences Berlin as well as Russian Studies, Sociology and Political Science at the Humboldt University of Berlin and the Moscow State Lomonosov University. Following her studies, she headed the coordination office for the Robert Bosch Foundation's lecturer programs in Moscow in 1999/2000 and taught German as a foreign language at the Faculties of Journalism, Economics and Law at Moscow State Lomonosov University. From 2002 to 2009, Simone Voigt worked at the Goethe-Institut Moscow. She was first responsible for cultural

programs and later for language course cooperation. After serving for a year as a lecturer for the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) at the Institute for State and Law at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, she returned to the Goethe-Institut Moscow in October 2010 and took over as head of Press and Public Relations. In February 2016, she was posted to the Goethe-Institut Hong Kong as deputy director and head of language department. Since April 2021, Simone Voigt has been working as director of the Goethe-Institut Bosnia and Herzegovina, based in Sarajevo.

Tracing

Dorothee Mosters

The symposium “Voicing the Commons: Participatory Art and New Public Imaginaries” marked the conclusion of the transnational project *if walls could tell*, initiated and artistically directed by Mischa Kuball, whose work has for decades consistently examined the relationship between art, the public sphere, and communal responsibilities. The long-term project exemplifies an artistic practice that does not remain within the protected space of the museum, but deliberately enters the public realm, embracing uncertainty and encounter.

In Sarajevo, Bucharest, Skopje, Chişinău, Ljubljana, Kraljevica, and Čačak, simple white walls were installed. Reminiscent of institutional architectures, they nonetheless stepped beyond them, exposing themselves to the traces of everyday life, the city, and its inhabitants. Initially empty and open, these white surfaces became projection screens for urban reality: they absorbed dust, lettering, shadows, and touch - unplanned, spontaneous human traces. Over time, they collected signs of the present, allowing climate, movement, and social life to inscribe themselves before carrying these impressions back into institutional contexts.

What emerges here is not merely an aesthetic gesture, but a social cycle. Art leaves the institution to listen to the world outside and returns transformed by what it has encountered. Museums and galleries become resonance chambers, places in which



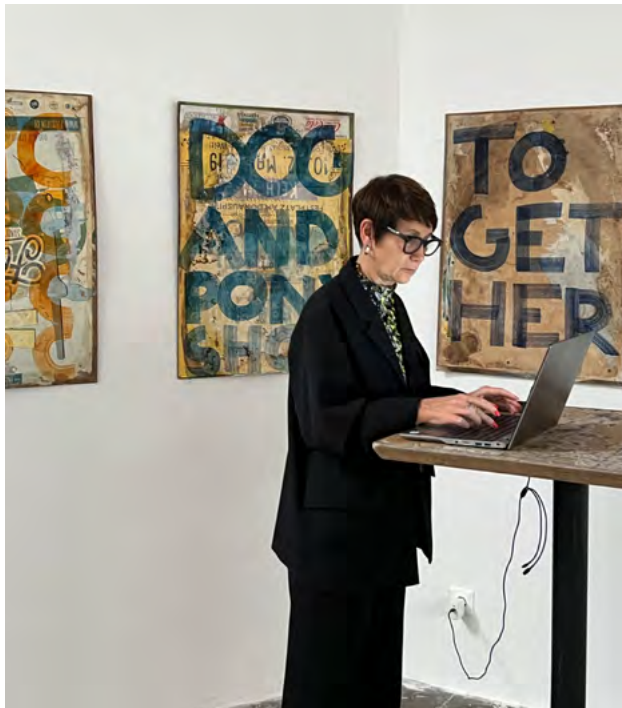
Senka Ibrišimbegović, Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art, Sarajevo, Photo © Archiv Mischa Kuball, Düsseldorf 2026.



Lina Franko and Andi Slawinski, Frankopan Castle, Kraljevica, Photo © Archiv Mischa Kuball, Düsseldorf 2026.



Panel discussion with Branka Benčić, Mojca Puncer, Călin Dan, Senka Ibrišimbegović and Zoran Erić Photo © Archiv Mischa Kuball, Düsseldorf 2026.



Simone Voigt, Goethe Institut Sarajevo. Photo © Archiv Mischa Kuball, Düsseldorf 2026.

Voicing the Commons: Participatory Art and New Public Imaginaries, International symposium at Weltkunstzimmer, Düsseldorf, Germany, October 16–17, 2025

In the wake of growing social fragmentation, contested histories, and authoritarian shifts across post-socialist contexts, participatory art has emerged as a powerful tool for reclaiming public space and amplifying marginalized voices. This final conference at Weltkunstzimmer brings together artists, curators, theorists, and managers of cultural institutions to reflect on the international project *if walls could tell*, which explored how blank white walls—symbolic structures of openness—can become platforms for expression, dissent, and collective imagination.

Spanning diverse urban contexts—Sarajevo, Bucharest, Skopje, Chişinău, Ljubljana, Kraljevica, and Čačak—the project revealed public space as a profoundly political terrain, where art does not merely mirror society but actively produces new forms of civic engagement.

At the heart of the conference lie several key questions: How can we imagine and construct shared spaces in divided societies? What role can participatory art play in reshaping our sense of belonging, ownership, and responsibility in the public realm? Building on the experiences the project *if walls could tell*, participatory art will be examined as a commoning practice—not merely as a means of creating artworks, but as a process of forging new social relations, solidarities, and forms of care.

Program:

October 16
Keynote by Blanca de la Torre, Director, IVAM, Valencia
Introduction by Dorothee Mosters, Head of Visual Arts Department, Kunststiftung NRW

October 17, 10am to 6pm
Panels with:
Senka Ibrišimbegović, Director Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art, Sarajevo
Călin Dan, Director of MNAC Bucharest
Vladimir Jančevski, Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Skopje
Lilia Dragneva, Director of the Center for Contemporary Art, KSA:K Chişinău
Mojca Puncer, Professor of Philosophy, Ljubljana
Lina Franko, RIZOM [K] – Frankopan Castle, Kraljevica
Branka Benčić, Director of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka
Predrag Živković, Curator and Deputy Director of Art Gallery “Nadežda Petrović”, Čačak

Curator and moderator: Zoran Erić, research fellow at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade



Performative Intervention
by Mohamad Moe Sabbah

the public sphere is not fixed, but continuously renegotiated. It opens spaces for speaking and listening, for disagreement and exchange, via spaces in which participation can be experienced and relationships can form across difference.

At a time when walls - both visible and invisible - are rising once again, the decision to keep these walls white and open becomes a powerful gesture. They invite us to reconsider what we hold in common and to inscribe ourselves into shared spaces rather than sealing ourselves off. In this sense, *if walls could tell* reflects both the transience of opinions and traces, and the enduring significance of human gestures and actions. The decision made by Kuball and his team to situate the project and include non-EU countries takes a clear position. It seeks dialogue precisely where divisions become visible, not to erase them, but to give them space. This approach avoids easy solutions; it is grounded instead in dialogue, trust, and perseverance. Such an attitude is neither self-evident nor incidental, but it is an artistic and human quality cultivated through years of sustained engagement.

From his library installation in Tirana in 2006 to his performance in Bihać, Kuball has long addressed questions that have since moved to the centre of broader cultural debate: the role of art institutions, the meaning of participation, and our shared responsibility for the public sphere.

The Kunststiftung NRW has consistently supported projects rooted in dialogue and exchange. We encourage artists and institutions to take risks and to experiment. For us, *if walls could tell* exemplifies what we understand as urgent and meaningful art funding: supporting projects that transcend boundaries between countries, disciplines, institutions, and publics. We fund not only artworks, but processes: the building of networks, the courage to experiment, and collective reflection on social responsibility. This is especially the case in times of growing political polarization, both internationally and in Germany, as we believe that art must remain a space in which common ground is not prescribed but negotiated; a space where dissent can be productive and where listening is as vital as speaking. As a foundation, we are grateful to accompany artists like Mischa Kuball, who remind us that art is not a closed system, but a living organism. We would like to thank all partner institutions and the following committed, thoughtful representatives who made this project possible; Senka Ibrišimbegović, Virgil Ștefan Nițulescu, Vladimir Janchevski, Lilia Dragneva, Dumitru Carbuni, Blaž Peršin, Lina Franko and Andi Slawinski, and Predrag Živković.

Dorothee Mosters has been Head of Visual Arts at *Kunststiftung NRW* since October 2018, a role she has shared in dual leadership with Jasmina Merz since 2022. In this position, they oversee numerous funding programs for artists and curators, institutions, and project spaces in Germany and abroad.

Porous Walls: Curating Participation, Repair, and Ecological Care

Blanca de la Torre

For me, curating is an expanded artistic practice and an epistemic artifact. It is a cognitive device for extradisciplinary research and the activation of critical, creative methodologies. From a deeply collaborative perspective, curatorial practice is a space for the collective production of knowledge and for situated action, where discourses are shaped through dialogue, shared attitudes, affects, desires, and ways of doing. In the last decades, participatory practices have become a central strategy in contemporary art for engaging complex social and environmental issues. Rather than debating fine-grained distinctions between “participatory” and “collaborative” (a terrain many authors have mapped), this essay foregrounds their shared capacity to construct new narratives, create productive short circuits in response to contemporary climate challenges, and open spaces of encounter, experimentation, and disruption oriented toward an ecosocial transition.

Curating collaborative artistic practices, I argue, is not only a mode of representation but a mode of world-making, a way to imagine post-fossil alternatives, activate reparative frameworks, and transform present conflicts into possibilities for sustainable and collective care. These practices prioritize process over object, collaboration over singular authorship, and experience over representation. They make knowledge collectively and situate it within specific contexts. Drawing on a selection of projects from my curatorial background, this essay traces three overlapping frames: institutional experiments, workshop/laboratory formats, and multispecies participation, to show how participatory strategies can reconfigure power, action, and responsibility in public life.

Mischa Kuball’s *if walls could tell* sits naturally within this frame. His public-space, participatory methods activate walls as porous sites of memory, testimony, and civic agency. They could be seen as surfaces that record, open, and repair rather than simply enclose or display. Kuball’s interventions complicate curatorial temporality by privileging durational engagement, collective testimony, and weathering over discrete openings and foregrounding public agency as co-authorship. In doing so, his practice exemplifies how walls in the city can be reframed as infrastructures for social listening, repair, and ongoing civic negotiation rather than inert backdrops.

This essay opens with institutional and programmatic experiments that sought to bend museum rhythms and foreground process; it then examines workshops and open laboratories as formats to translate scientific, local, and embodied knowledge into public action; and it concludes with explorations of multispecies and non-human participation that unsettle anthropocentric assumptions. Along the way I suggest practical and ethical reflections for curating participatory and collaborative art projects, lessons that resonate with Kuball’s project and with the broader stakes of activating walls as both civic and reparative surfaces.

PRAXIS Program and New Institutionalism

In 2010, I launched PRAXIS as a long-term program for projects that would rarely find room within a conventional museum. Installed in one of the monumental temporary halls of ARTIUM, the Contemporary Art Museum of the Basque Country in Vitoria-Gasteiz, PRAXIS was conceived as an organic zone set apart from the institution's usual rhythms: an experimental enclave that challenged assumptions about openings and closings, hidden-installation processes, intolerance of error, rigid calendars, and the demand for finished, fetishized objects. Instead, the program foregrounded reuse (artists worked with remnants of earlier exhibitions), low-waste practices, visible process, care, and a non-consumerist ethic. PRAXIS operated as an open laboratory whose flexible temporality and hybrid programming disrupted institutional logics and reconfigured authorship as shared practice.

Rooted in DIY values (i.e. recycling, self-production, relationality), PRAXIS quickly moved toward a DIT (Do It Together) orientation that emphasized collective agency and co-creation over individual maker narratives. The program deliberately blurred roles among artists, staff, and publics: installation and production took place in view of visitors; rules were bent to allow unpredictability and play; and the museum became a site for ongoing experimentation rather than a container for completed objects. This reframing staged the museum as infrastructure for civic practice and cultivated a new institutionalism attentive to process, repair, and communal responsibility.

Jenny Marketou's *Paperophanies* (2011) stands as the program's emblematic example and a key articulation of my curatorial approach. Marketou installed an atelier inside the museum where participants (including museum visitors and local residents), and activist groups co-designed slogan-bearing garments from a unisex pattern. Through a



Jenny Marketou, *Paperophanies*, 2011

sequence of collaborative workshops, they cut, stitched, and inscribed messages of solidarity and protest; the garments remained on display until a public street demonstration activated them as wearable banners. By routing creation through collective workshops and then moving the work into the streets, *Paperophanies* collapsed the boundary between exhibition and action, object and event. As a participatory project, *Paperophanies* exemplifies several linked concepts central to PRAXIS: first, material reuse and non-fetishized objects (the garment is a functional sign, not a commodified artifact); second, shared authorship and visible process (the atelier made the process of making itself legible); third, institutional redistribution of agency (the museum produced networks and capabilities that extended into public space). The work also reframes participation as political identification: clothing becomes a medium for collective address and the city becomes an expanded stage for the museum's experiments.

Ultimately PRAXIS's openness generated strengths and tensions. Visible production invited publics into decision-making procedures but required sustained facilitation and ethical attention to who participates and whose voices are amplified. The reuse imperative prompted creative economies of material but also logistic complexities in conservation and safety. These frictions, however, are instructive: they reveal that participatory curating requires not only inventive formats but also ongoing labor in mediation, care, and institutional negotiation, practices that transform museums into platforms for collective learning and civic repair.

Hybris as a Socio-ecological Framework for Participation

Hybris, shown at MUSAC, the Contemporary Art Museum of Castilla y León, was conceived not as a single narrative but as a constellation of positions mapping the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities of the ecological crisis. Structured in three per-



Maider López, *Zoom In*, 2016



Amor Muñoz, *Yuca_Tech*, 2014–2015

meable chapters: *Solutions* (restorative aesthetics/ecovention), *Reuses* (working with discarded or natural materials), and *Actions* (performance and collaborative practices), the exhibition prioritized projects that enact ecological thinking through collective processes rather than represent it as an object.

Several emblematic works anchored the show's argument that participation and collaboration are not merely modes of audience inclusion but material strategies for ecological repair and long-term stewardship. Joseph Beuys's *7,000 Oaks* (1982) functions paradigmatically: its social-sculpture logic redistributed labor and responsibility across institutions, students, and citizens, turning tree-planting into a durable civic infrastructure. The work's durability and dispersed authorship model how ecological projects extend beyond the gallery into situated, co-produced landscapes.

Agnes Denes's *Tree Mountain -- A Living Time Capsule* (1992) amplifies this temporal and legal dimension. By structuring a planted mountain through mathematical patterning, securing custodial rights across generations, and framing tree-planting as an act of collective custodianship, Denes foregrounds participation as intergenerational obligation and ecological governance rather than single-event performance.

Amy Balkin's *Public Smog* (2004-) and Lucía Loren's *Api Sophia* (2017) operate as hinge figures between policy, material practice, and local community engagement. Balkin translates legal and financial tactics into a participatory intervention that questions atmospheric commons; Loren converts the museum courtyard into an urban ecology, mobilizing local associations and visitors around beekeeping and shared stewardship. Both projects show how participation can materialize as juridical action, community care, and site-based exchange.

In the *Reuses* and *Actions* clusters, projects that embedded collaborative processes in production and fieldwork illustrated different vectors of participation. Maida López's project *Zoom In* (2016) uses workshops and teamwork to redistribute attention, skill, and authorship. Tiles made with students in Cappadocia make landscape attuned collective models of adaptation to environmental constraints. Amor Muñoz's Community Laboratories (*Yuca_Tech*, *Oto_Lab*, *Chiapas-Tech*, 2014-2016) emphasize shared making and technological autonomy — participation here is knowledge exchange and co-fabrication that builds local capacity and relational resilience.

In some collaborative practices, long-term participation and alternative temporalities are essential, and seeds frequently emerge as shared material. They operate as a powerful metaphor for the need to slow down in opposition to the contemporary obsession with immediacy, an urgency that ecological projects actively resist. This approach is evident in the work of Hiroshi Sunairi and Carma Casulá. Casulá's long-term research project, *Monsanto Is Not a Saint of My Devotion* (2012–2025), constitutes a Bank of Farmers' Memory focused on traditional agricultural knowledge and familial relationships to land. For over a decade, Casulá has invited farmers to contribute self-produced seeds, agricultural tools, and personal narratives related to cultivation, carefully documenting the origins, practices, and lived experiences surrounding seed collection and preservation. Similarly, *Sunairi's Tree Project* (2006–) closes the loop between memory, transnational care, and multisite participation. By collecting and distributing hibaku-jumoku seeds and tracking their growth globally, the project enacts collective caretaking that links ecological regeneration to histories of violence and survival; its distributed authorship and lived continuations, including the personal planting I undertook, illustrate how participatory projects persist as practices of relational stewardship.

Across these selected works, *Hybris* advances three linked claims about participatory practice: participation redistributes agency and responsibility beyond curated moments into infrastructures of care and governance; collaborative processes reframe artworks as living protocols (durational, replicable, and legally or institutionally embedded); and participatory formats unearth ethical and logistical tensions (mediation, equity of voice, material safety) that must be worked through as part of curatorial labor. *Hybris* therefore treated participation not as an additive feature but as a curatorial strategy that remakes institutional temporality, accountability, and publics in order to practice ecological repair.

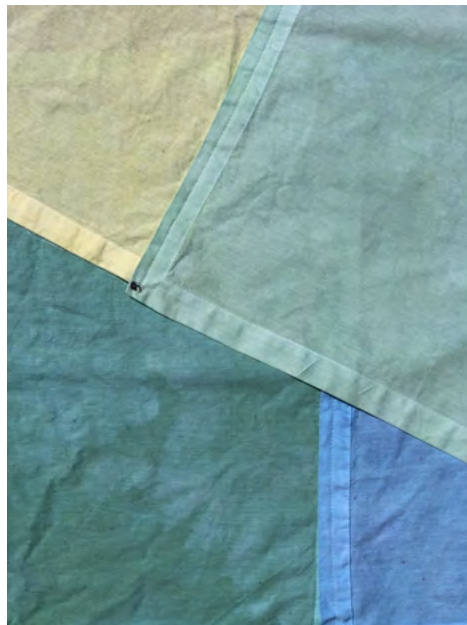
The Workshop as a Format: *The Water Office*


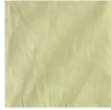


The Water Office (2019) addressed global water challenges through participatory artistic practices that treated art as both a tool for action and a critical frame for inquiry. The workshop format functioned as laboratory, collective research exhibition, and site of civic engagement; participation meant active involvement of communities, collaborators, and institutions in producing situated knowledge, not mere audience attendance.

The exhibition operated as an open lab that made processes visible and shared tools, protocols, and outcomes. Juanli Carrión's *pH Series* translated chemical analysis into a collaborative, sensory language. Using locally grown purple cabbage to produce pH-sensitive dyes, Carrión and collaborators tested water samples from Washington (DC) and impregnated cotton fabrics with the resulting chromatic scales. The installation displayed both final textiles and process materials, rendering scientific method legible and inviting publics into hands-on interpretation of contamination.

Juan Zamora's *The Coliform Project: Performing Water* converted microbiological data into performative notation. Working from water samples collected with the Potomac Riverkeepers Network, the artist and volunteers cultured bacteria in a boat laboratory and transformed growth patterns into musical scores. The subsequent performance and recorded sound became part of a layered installation that extended participation into auditory and temporal registers, showing how embodied, collaborative protocols can translate scientific evidence into civic narratives.

Basurama and Rachel Schmidt's *Water Memories Itinerant Office* centered storytelling and collective memory. Participants contributed personal water narratives and objects that were archived as time capsules in multiple media. The project reframed hydrologi-



-  **ANACOSTIA RIVER**
@The Yards Marina
PH 5.5
-  **POTOMAC RIVER**
@Fraklyn D Roosevelt Memorial Park
PH 6.5
-  **TILDA BASIN**
@Ohio Dr SW
PH 7
-  **POTOMAC RIVER**
@National Harbor
PH 8.5

Juanli Carrión, *pH Series*, 2019

cal systems as entangled with industry, transport, and waste, and foregrounded experiential testimony as a form of water literacy that contests sanitized, commercial narratives about nature.

Elena Lavellés' *Strategic Contamination: Viral Sustainability* emphasized information circulation as participatory practice. Following research at an advanced wastewater treatment plant, Lavellés developed a campaign and a Manifesto on Water Sustainability, pairing archival and poetic materials to activate publics through knowledge dissemination and rhetorical intervention.

Tania Candiani's *Walking the River* mobilized participation through embodied observation. A guided literary and audiovisual walk along the Billy Goat Trail engaged participants with Humboldtian modes of attention; workshops produced notebooks, frottages, recordings, and an audiovisual essay that translated field observation into collective documentation and reflection.

All these projects show three central affordances of the workshop format for water justice. Workshops uncover method and material, enabling nonexperts to access, interpret, and act on technical information. They reconfigure authorship into shared protocols that extend beyond exhibition timelines. And they create heterogeneous publics whose embodied experience and testimony become evidence and motive for civic change. The Water Office thus models how participatory art can operate as a practical and discursive infrastructure for water democratization and ecological accountability.



Juanli Carrión, *pH Series*, 2019

Participation to Face Ecological Imbalances

Alongside large curatorial frameworks such as PRAXIS, *Hybris*, and *The Water Office*, the exhibition *Imbalance* at ŁAŻNIA Centre for Contemporary Art and the 3rd Helsinki Biennial show how participatory practices take many forms depending on context, scale, and temporality.

In *Imbalance*, the works of Cecylia Malik, Federico Guzman and Superflex illustrate how participation may emerge from a single gesture that becomes collective, be organized as invitations to contribute materially to ongoing works that operate through prototyping tools intended for use beyond the exhibition.

Cecylia Malik's *The Polish Mothers on the Tree Stumps* (2017), shown in *Imbalance* at ŁAŻNIA Centre for Contemporary Art, illustrates how a performative image can catalyze distributed collective action. Responding to a law that eased tree felling by private owners, Malik reworked an earlier project, *365 Trees*, into a visible protest: photographs of herself breastfeeding on tree stumps were shared online and rapidly adopted by other mothers across Poland. The piece demonstrates how a simple, embodied gesture can scale into a shared visual language of dissent and care.

Federico Guzmán's *Plante lo que crea conveniente* (2003) emphasizes duration and growth as participatory registers. Seeds placed in a world-map pot and lit by a strong spotlight turn the work into a living process; visitor contributions (even a single seed), alter the piece over time and frame ecological care as an artistic condition rather than a static object.

Superflex's *Supergas/Massawe Family, Tanzania* (1997) situates participation in adoption and replication. Developed with African and Danish engineers, the mobile biogas unit translates ecological design into household practice. Its value lies not only in demonstration but in local uptake and shared investment, shifting participation from spectatorship to use and dissemination.

At the 3rd Helsinki Biennial in 2025, titled *Shelter: Below and beyond, becoming and belonging* that I co-curated with Katti Kivinen, several projects had addressed the challenges of collaborative and participatory practices as a response to ecological empathy. Katie Holten's and Geraldine Javier's proposals unfold through pedagogical, care-based, and narrative formats that expand exhibition space into social infrastructure.

Holten's *Learning to Be Better Lovers* (2025) proposed participation through an ecology of language. Through a downloadable Forest Alphabet and Forest School invited walks, gatherings, drawing sessions, and storytelling were activated by treating participation as ongoing learning and reconfiguration of human–plant relations. Javier's community-based installation *Earth, Water, Air, Fire, Void* (2024) and *Witness* (2025) activated workshops with school children and local participants. They produced talismans to protect the trees (made out of cloth and recycled materials), emphasizing care through hands-on practice.

All these projects show how participation reorganizes artistic production around responsibility, situated knowledge, and conditions of coexistence. Participation can be immediate or slow, viral or local, ceremonial or infrastructural, but in every case, it requires sustained facilitation, ethical attention to voice and access, and an acceptance of process as outcome. May these conditions be extrapolated beyond the human? That question opens the next chapter.



Katie Holten: *Learning To Be Better Lovers (Forest School)*, 2025, detail. Helsinki Biennial 8.6.–21.9.2025, Vallisaari Island. Photo: HAM / Helsinki Biennial / Maija Toivanen

Participatory Practices with Non-Humans

Can non-humans be considered participants in collaborative or participatory practices? I will keep this question open. Across my curatorial trajectory I have worked with artists who engage interspecies relationships, challenging anthropocentric assumptions about agency, authorship, and participation.

A formative example from *Hybris* resulted from the collaboration between musician Nilo Gallego and shepherd Felipe Quintana. *Felipe vuelve a casa con las ovejas sonando* (1999) staged a sound action in the village of Bercianos del Real Camino with three hundred Churra sheep wearing bells. The everyday return of the flock was transformed into a concert without disrupting pastoral rhythms. Sheep were not symbolic stand-ins but active participants: their movement, sound, and presence shaped the work and its temporal logic.

Other works in *Hybris* and beyond made non-human needs legible through modest interventions designed for cohabitation. Asia Piascik and Monika Brauntsch proposed small insect hotels as refuges for urban pollinators, foregrounding care as participation. Kalle Hamm and Dzamil Kamanger's *Bug Rugs* (2025) scaled this idea into four sculptural insect habitats that translate textile patterns into architectural shelter, embedding interspecies encounter in the urban landscape as part of the 3rd Helsinki Biennial.

The Biennial reframed non-human agencies as central curatorial actors. Tamara Henderson's *Worm Affair* (2023) transmitted live audio from compost worms, making subterranean metabolic processes perceptible and positioning worms as co-creators. Kristiina Koskentola's *Murder of Crows* (2021) developed reciprocal bonds with a flock of crows; objects exchanged between birds and artist became co-authored material traces. Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas's *Futurity Island* (2018 – 2025) converted drainage pipes into ultrasonic channels that rendered insect sounds audible, collaborating with scientists and architects to treat non-human signals as knowledge. Band of Weeds' *The Weep of Trees* (2025) translated tree stress chemistry into sound, amplifying vegetal responses and challenging plant blindness.

My curatorial projects have explored these plant-music crossings before. *Concert for the Biocene* (2020) staged a string quartet performing to an audience of plants in the

Barcelona Opera House; the plants were later distributed to healthcare workers, enacting a gesture of care that extended beyond representational metaphor.

These cases do not resolve whether non-humans can be full participants in the same sense as humans. Rather, they show how curatorial practice can open spaces where non-human agencies are listened to, accommodated, and integrated into shared protocols. Such practices foreground care, reciprocity, long-term commitment, and shared vulnerability. They relocate the artwork from representation into relation, process, and responsibility. Many questions still remain to be reflected on in this context.

How can we genuinely rethink our relationship with non-human entities and move from logics of use and extraction toward forms of collaboration and cohabitation with other species? Is it an “impossible possibility” to escape the anthropocentric paradigm, or can it be displaced, at least partially, through situated artistic practices? Furthermore, what kinds of artistic gestures are capable of shifting the anthropocentric gaze without simply replacing it with another totalizing framework?

Conclusion

In retrospect, all the analyzed curatorial projects tackled the value of collaboration and participation when addressing the current ecological anxieties. PRAXIS demonstrated how institutional experiments can reconfigure museum temporality, foreground process, and redistribute agency through reuse, open production, and visible co-creation. *Hybris* showed that participatory practices can operate as socio-ecological protocols that embed stewardship, legal and temporal commitments, and community care into



Kalle Hamm & Dzamil Kamanger: *Bug Rugs*, 2025, detail. Helsinki Biennial 8.6.–21.9.2025, Esplanade Park. Photo: HAM / Helsinki Biennial / Henni Hyvärinen

artistic projects. *The Water Office* illustrated the workshop as an effective format for translating technical water knowledge into collective literacy and civic action. They manifest how participation beyond conventional frames can take multiple shapes alongside small contributions that alter living works over time. This includes *Imbalance*, where viral gestures may scale into movements, and design-based interventions are meant for adoption and replication. The Helsinki Biennial illustrated different forms of empathic approaches to art as shelter and, as the title suggested, go beyond, look below, and feel ways of belonging to and becoming collective. Finally, multispecies projects challenge anthropocentric frameworks by treating other life forms as sources of knowledge and co-actors in shared environments.

Another issue pertinent for participatory practice is that it redistributes responsibility. Curators must plan for sustained facilitation, inclusion, and care. It reframes outcomes as the process and protocol that are as important as the objects. Finally, participation exposes tensions between mediation, equity of voice, conservation, and safety, as the notion of legacy requires active negotiation. Public-space participatory projects such as Mischa Kuball's *if walls could tell* resonate with these lessons by treating urban surfaces as porous infrastructures for testimony, repair, and collective agency. Activating walls in the city demands attention to temporality, material aging, and local authorship; it requires the same ethical labor of listening, sustaining, and stewarding that participatory, multispecies, and workshop formats demand.

These projects do not offer definitive answers. They are laboratories for testing relations and practices that foreground care, repair, and shared responsibility. Curating participatory work therefore demands sustained commitment beyond programming: establishing infrastructures for maintenance and stewardship, documenting processes and outcomes for future use, and creating pathways for participants to take ownership. Ethically, it means attending to equity of voice, consent, and the distribution of benefits. Curating participatory projects is not episodic event-making but an ongoing practice of enabling others to act, learn, adapt, and inherit sites of collective action in order to build common desirable futures.

Blanca de la Torre (PhD) is a curator, art historian and researcher whose professional work lies at the intersection of visual arts, cultural ecology, and sustainable creative practices. Her professional activity includes, in addition to curating exhibitions, artistic director of projects, seminars, workshops, curatorial residencies and international symposiums. She has published more than a hundred specialized essays in books, catalogues and magazines, and regularly participates in international conferences and symposiums on culture and sustainability. She has curated projects internationally in prominent Biennials such as Helsinki with Kati Kivinen and Cuenca, Ecuador, and exhibitions in MoCAB, Belgrade; Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg, Austria; EFA, Elisabeth Foundation Project Space, New York; the Center for the Arts of Monterrey, Mexico; the Carrillo Gil Museum in Mexico City; NC-Arte Bogota, Colombia; LAZNIA Center for Contemporary Art, Gdansk, Poland, Alcalá 31, Madrid; CentroCentro, Madrid; CAAM, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria; 516 Contemporary Arts Museum Albuquerque, EEUU, and the MUSAC, Contemporary Art Museum of Castilla y León, among others. Since April (2025), she is the Director of IVAM, Valencian Institute of Modern Art.

Participatory Art as a Practice of Commoning

Zoran Erić

The Genealogy of an Idea

More than five years ago, Mischa Kuball approached me with a deceptively simple idea: to symbolically “transfer” a U-shaped section of the walls from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, where I was working as chief curator at the time, and place it in a public space for citizens’ free expression for several weeks, before returning it to the museum. This concept, triggered by the museum’s reopening in 2017 after a decade-long closure for reconstruction, captured the spirit of renewal for this iconic building which was opened in 1965 as an exemplar of socialist modernist architecture in Ušće Park along the Sava River. The museum embodied layers of historical significance and its reopening prompted urgent questions embodied in Kuball’s concept, i.e. how do local communities perceive museums, and how can museums actively engage with them?

This idea resonated deeply with my own curatorial practice, developed during the museum’s prolonged closure, which emphasized the permeability of cultural institutions to participatory art that involves diverse social groups. Drawing on my long collaboration with Kuball, I recognized the project’s potential to address these issues, despite the formidable challenges that include institutional resistance to the political oligarchy that viewed the museum as a tool for (self)promotion rather than public dialogue. Our efforts to secure support repeatedly failed. Even after leaving the institution in 2022, the concept lingered in my thoughts. Kuball later revisited the idea and wrote a statement inspired by John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) whose quote became a leitmotif for the project: “Why the hell does everybody want to succeed? I’d like to meet somebody who wanted to fail. That’s the only sublime thing.” Through this *museum_transfer* framework, Kuball challenged the transitory nature of cultural spaces, focusing on the imprints of public interaction and raising provocative questions about whether the community is becoming obsolete in polarised and fragmented societies, and what the role of artists and participatory artistic interventions could be in repairing the broken social bonds.

Our persistence paid off when the project gained momentum through key partnerships, notably with Simone Voigt of the Goethe Institute in Sarajevo and Senka Ibrišimbegović of the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art in Sarajevo. There, the concept was revived amid the challenges of constructing a new museum building designed by Renzo Piano to house a vast international collection. As support expanded across institutions, Sarajevo’s artistic scene breathed new life into the initiative, adapting it to the local context.

In Sarajevo, where no museum building yet existed, three white walls were installed on the future site, inviting public interaction with instructions in the local language and English. The installation serves as a platform for free expression, encouraging interventions like markers or spray paint to create a collective artwork symbolizing typically

restricted museum spaces. After three weeks of citizens' engagement with the walls, a panel discussion was held in a public space in front of them. Representatives of the local art scene were invited to discuss the idea of a future Museums Quarter, including its pros and cons and the potential impact it should have on the local communities and the cultural scene of Sarajevo. This conceptual framework was later applied and adjusted to other partnering museums or galleries. Where possible, the walls were returned to the institution to "witness" a public debate with local experts on context-specific topics, specifically suggested for each venue, while addressing socio-political legacies in the post-socialist contexts of the region of South-East Europe.

Each art institution in the countries involved in the project, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, North Macedonia, Moldova, Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, faces specific challenges, ranging from basic infrastructural and financial issues to difficulties in engaging local communities. However, a more pressing question often discussed with protagonists of the local scene was how each museum or gallery can redefine its identity and role in society while fighting for its integrity to reinterpret the concept of contemporaneity in today's social context. The ongoing political pressure of "commercialization" of the institutions, which forces them to reproduce a neoliberal model of creating a culture of spectacle, cannot be ignored. In this context, the project *if walls could tell* directly addressed these vulnerabilities in each country and society, sparking debates about the role of cultural institutions and their communication with the public, including those who are not museum-goers. Furthermore, this promotes an artistic approach to critically reflect on social processes and their influence on the cultural sphere, particularly museums and the communities they are embedded into. The personal journey and experiences gained in all seven countries and institutions from the region where the project was realized led me to explore the theoretical underpinnings that Kuball's idea embodies in the context of participatory artistic practices.

Theoretical Debates over Participatory Artistic Practices

The theoretical debates over participatory artistic practices, particularly in public space, have been ongoing for several decades, and one of the crucial aspects is to examine how Mischa Kuball, with the project *if walls could tell*, contributes to and reengages with this discourse while assuming a very specific position. The current debates on the role of interactive and participatory public art focus on their political and social aesthetics. Two different models, among many, could be discerned in this context, i.e.: interventional space, which explores the potential of participatory public art to reshape everyday life environments; and commoning space, where participatory art can create spaces that establish common social relations among specific social groups and build shared relations and collective inscriptions.¹

Concerning these theoretical models, I will suggest yet another position of the artist as a catalyst and mediator that sets up a "stage" for open-ended participation, a *tabula rasa* without any filtering, guiding principles or limits imposed upon the potential users/public of the blank white walls to be set in public space for their expression. Even though the walls symbolically represent the institutional framework of the museum from which they were taken and will be returned, the citizens can perceive them as an empty signifier not necessarily connected to the discourse of institutional critique. Herewith, the question is raised whether this kind of interactive artistic practice in public space is merely a temporary "speakers' corner" or reflects the *vox populi* in the uncontrolled and decolonized public space.

Drawing on Claire Bishop's definition of participation as making people the medium and material of an artwork, Kuball's project opts for an open-ended, reversed approach as the walls invite unfiltered expression to disrupt passive spectatorship and turn it into an act of co-creation.² Bishop's arguments, informed by the theory of radical democracy, advocate for resistant and antagonistic art practices that challenge co-dependency and conviviality,³ and warn us that participation can sometimes prioritize process over aesthetic and critical engagement, leading to a dilution of artistic intent.⁴ Conversely, Shannon Jackson offers a critique of the oppositions and tensions traditionally associated with participatory art.⁵ Jackson supports a more "eclectic" and nuanced approach to social engagement and the aesthetic integrity of participatory art. Unlike Bishop, Jackson does not prioritize creative agency, a focus that could undermine the complexity of the social and institutional contexts in which participatory art is embedded. From this perspective, Kuball's project creates an open platform for interaction, where the walls serve as a blank space for imprints of diverse voices without any assumptions about the "aesthetic" and "conflictual" aspect that they may or may not induce.

The artistic position Kuball proposes is to "stage" the context where users become producers of the content of an artwork, thus aligning itself with recent theories that underscore how participatory artistic practices foster community engagement and collaborative practices empowering participants, transforming them from passive consumers into active co-authors of collective experiences.⁶ The traces left on the walls have proven to tackle both global and local socio-political urgencies and crises and represent diverse ideological perspectives and societal sore points with subcultural and subversive messages in the form of graffiti, stencils or even abstract mural images as free artistic expression of the users. From this angle, the project resonates with the concept of *usership* developed by theorist Steven Wright who perceived it as a new category of political subjectivity that arose alongside the 2.0 culture that is based on user-generated content. The concept of *usership*, as Wright argues, fundamentally challenges the dominant cultural models of spectatorship in many ways, but also the neoliberal economic model of ownership that is particularly reflected in the institutional settings.⁷

The trap that participatory art can often fall into is that while presenting the collective actions as empowering for the community members, especially the ones belonging to the marginalized groups, it can sometimes obscure the social inequalities and the system that reproduces them. As Gregory Sholette has argued, participatory art operates in a paradoxical space where the assumption of creating a "democratic space" can produce a counter effect of reinforcing existing power dynamics and exploitative practices so present in the art world.⁸ The danger of participatory art practices is that they may not be able to transgress the established institutional frameworks, which serve to aestheticize social engagement rather than produce meaningful social change. One concrete example from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje is very illustrative of this debate. While attending the guided tour through the Museum, a group of school-children, mostly Roma from one of the poorest city neighborhoods, happened to be on the site of the museum's porch where the project was inaugurated. They immediately joined in and filled them with their drawings and messages, amongst which, the one of "Black Barbie" serves as a poignant example of the potency of giving voice to marginalized social groups. However, the panel discussion held at the museum brought a heated debate and challenged the logistical constraints that forced us to place the walls adjacent to the museum's building, on its turf, and not in the inner city where they would be more accessible to the larger communities. If not for the haphazard set of cir-

cumstances that brought the Roma children to the museum, the question of what would have been the chance for their voices to be heard and expressed on the walls remains. To recontextualize the quote from Dos Passos, I would argue that the failure is sometimes an inherent and constitutive element of this type of participative projects without predetermined “script” and invited users.

One of the most challenging aspects of Kuball’s project was the aim of fostering dialogue in public spaces and creating networks of solidarity in fragmented societies. The potential of the artistic proposal for participation could thus have a direct impact on the dynamics of community engagement and collaboration. Within this context, the concept of care becomes crucial.

Care aesthetics offers a useful bridge from critiques of participation to longer-duration, relational practices. James Thompson develops care aesthetics to show how caring practices have an aesthetic dimension, attention, sensibility, rhythm, and materiality, and how artistic processes can cultivate capacities of care.⁹ Similarly, Thomas Munley positions care at the core of participatory art, arguing that collaborative cultural practice can cultivate solidarity, mutual responsibility, and durable communal bonds.¹⁰

Furthermore, it is important to revisit the theory of commoning, where participatory art aims to create spaces that can establish shared social relations among specific social groups in various localities.¹¹ In doing so, it is necessary to define the theoretical sources of this thesis, which stem from the “social practice of living together.”¹² The use of the verb commoning (the practice of making things common, becoming common) instead of the noun *commons* (common good) highlights the processual nature of striving toward the realization of the “common” as a set of social relations that are not fixed, but in a continuous state of change. Commoning could also be conceptualized as a spatial practice that contests privatization and produces alternative modes of urban cohabitation. Everyday acts of sharing and mutual care can reconfigure public space where urban potentiality emerges through performative practices that reclaim and reconfigure the city and may act as emancipatory forces when entrenched patterns of control are disrupted.¹³

Finally, Danny McNally argues that participatory artistic practices, which focus on engaging specific social groups or communities, typically place-based, prioritize collective actions and the establishment of shared social relations.¹⁴ Stemming from his analysis of participatory art’s ethics and aesthetics, the project *if walls could tell*, aligning with the idea of collectivity, could be placed outside capitalist logic, where the walls act as a catalyst for ethical, processual commoning. Ultimately, this positions Kuball’s project as a dynamic space for autonomous cultural life, questioning whether the practices of commoning, collaboration and co-creation offer a meaningful platform for social interaction and equitable engagement of all social groups, or merely another test for the art community to stay in its “bubble” and challenge the institutional constraints within it?

From Community to Commoning

Throughout the duration of the project *if walls could tell*, I have realized that it is crucial to engage with the philosophical insights of Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot when discussing the role of participatory art in redefining community. Both philosophers reject essentialist foundations of community based on race, culture, or identity, asserting instead that community emerges through our shared exposure to finitude and mortality, a concept resonating with George Bataille’s thoughts.¹⁵ They argue that

being-together is given in existence, yet it is inherently fragile and interruptive; thus, community cannot simply be produced as a fixed work or object.¹⁶ This perspective sheds light on Kuball's project, where the blank white walls in public spaces facilitate relational interactions, transforming ordinary citizens into co-creators and revealing the "inoperative" community through their unscripted expressions.

While both philosophers emphasize the fragility and openness of communal relations, they approach these dynamics from distinct perspectives. For Nancy, community is ontologically before any social, political, or institutional formation. *Being-in-common* is not produced through shared labor, identity, or functional cooperation but exists as the relational exposure of singularities to one another. This exposure, or inoperative dimension, is central: community cannot be totalized, captured, or secured.¹⁷ At its core is not productivity or functionality, but the relational spacing that allows singular beings to coexist without absorption into a collective identity. Nancy's philosophical concept brings together singularity and plurality as intertwined elements of being. While making a distinction between singularity (unique existence) and individuality (a closed, self-contained entity), he argues that being is always relational, *being-with* (*être-avec*), and that existing means being with others, where plurality is the originary condition. Community exists in the *between* (*l'entre*), not as a substance or higher collective subject. *Being-in-common* is thus not an additional feature of being; it is its fundamental structure. Nancy's theory grounds the ethical considerations of being in our exposure to others, where responsibility stems not from an abstract moral law, but from our shared finitude and vulnerability.¹⁸

Blanchot, by contrast, situates community within the ethical and ungraspable. For him, community is unavowable; it exists not through shared identity, mastery, or productive collaboration but through relational exposure that cannot be fully possessed or operationalized.¹⁹ Community is "negative",²⁰ structured around absence, interruption, and the ethical imperative to recognize the singularity of the other. It resides in the act of sharing that which can never be fully shared: of mutual self-exposure in common solitude, and in the paradoxical relation of absence of a binding substance and openness that remains unavowable.

This dialogue between Nancy and Blanchot also frames commoning as an enactment of inoperative and unavowable relationality. Commoning practices thus do not aim to totalize or instrumentalise social bonds but to preserve spaces of vulnerability, attentiveness, and co-existence.²¹

Building on Nancy and Blanchot's perspectives on the fragility of relational spaces, Kuball enacts this by allowing public inscriptions on the walls, creating a space of co-existence that resists institutional control. In Kuball's project, the walls function as a commoning practice, enabling participants to negotiate shared authorship and responsibility, mirroring Nancy's emphasis on exposure and Blanchot's ethical openness.²² As citizens engage with these blank walls, they transform public spaces into sites of emerging community, thereby challenging museums and cultural institutions to facilitate such relational dynamics beyond traditional frameworks. Thus, *if walls could tell* stands as a testament to the potential of participatory art to redefine communal relationships, foster dialogue, and promote collaborative engagement in the contemporary social landscape.

Institutional Framing of a Participatory Project

In an era of social fragmentation, contested histories, and authoritarian pressures in post-socialist societies, Mischa Kuball's *if walls could tell* project demonstrates the transformative potential of participatory art to reclaim and redefine public spaces as well as the role of art institutions in their continuous process of negotiation with local communities. Spanning cities like Sarajevo, Bucharest, Skopje, Chişinău, Ljubljana, Kraljevica, and Čačak, the initiative transformed blank white walls into dynamic platforms for expression, fostering dialogues that challenge institutional norms and amplify the voices of different social groups. Despite the continuous transformation of museums and cultural institutions into dynamic institutions that shape local communities and urban environments, intervening in everyday life, civic imaginaries, and public space,²³ one of the key issues they are still facing in the 21st century is how to develop new models of working with the public. The concept of Museum 3.0 is an example of the utterly different model of conceptualizing the way an institution functions in direct correlation with local communities.²⁴ This model is based on projects where the public becomes the actor that produces the content and institutional programs. The Museum 3.0 concept represents the new role of museums and other art institutions in society, based on the analysis of the concept of utility. It is driven by usership and not by the expert culture that engages with the public. Usership is perceived as a new category of political subjectivity that is based on user-generated content. Herewith, citizens as political subjects should be able to appropriate available political and economic instruments that turn them into active users and not passive consumers. In this context, Mischa Kuball's project opens up the space for all potential users of art programs to be turned into direct and immediate producers of the content. Moreover, they become co-creators of an artwork that in several cases was donated and incorporated into the collections of partnering museums, opening up a new set of questions regarding ownership of a collaborative art work that was given to the public museums to preserve, or otherwise repurposed or recycled to remain ephemeral statements. Herewith, in one of the panel discussions, a viable radical question was raised about the authorship and the credits to the artwork and why the name of the artist stands on the caption of the walls? While remaining the carrier of symbolic "ownership" of the idea and concept, the artist was always in the background, not even taking part in the discursive discussions unless directly asked or addressed by the panellist or publics. Yet, the credits in the museums will always go to the artist first and only then to anonymous community members of the city in question, in spite of the strongly emphasised position of an artist as a catalyst who is not "speaking in first person" but allowing others to speak out for themselves. The "aura" of artistic persona is thus unavoidable in this conceptual setting.

During the last decades, museums and cultural institutions were working increasingly with participatory and collaborative artistic practices to engage publics.²⁵ They are thus aligning themselves with tendencies in art that prioritize co-creation, as seen in Kuball's project, where citizens actively inscribe the walls, generating new forms of publicness. However, participation is not inherently emancipatory: it must be situated within the infrastructures, funding regimes, and governance arrangements that enable or constrain meaningful agency, or perpetuate imbalances,²⁶ a tension evident in Kuball's navigation of political pressures across post-socialist contexts. To grasp the emancipatory potential and limits of museum practice, it is therefore necessary to integrate the theoretical reflections on participatory art, commoning theory and care aesthetics, attending simultaneously to processes of co-creation, and collective agency and to the structural conditions that shape their possibilities.

In summary, the project *if walls could tell*, analyzed from different theoretical lenses regarding participatory practices and commoning, presents a specific artistic position that tends to transform passive spectators into active co-authors and question the role of museums and cultural institutions in civic life. Yet, its true measure lies in whether it has succeeded in reclaiming public realms from state and market forces or merely offered fleeting resistance. Ultimately, *if walls could tell* reminds us that participatory art is not just a medium for expression but a mediator for ongoing negotiation, urging institutions to embrace vulnerability and collective agency and while doing so, make stronger (regional) alliances. As societies continue to fragment, such projects may not resolve divisions but inspire the fragile, emergent and equitable communities built on the principles of solidarity and commoning practices.

Notes

- 1** Danny McNally, “Participatory Art and Geography: Politics, Publics, and Space.” *Progress in Human Geography* 48, no. 5 (2024): 538–553, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325231219698>
- 2** Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).
- 3** Bishop, otherwise, relies more on the political-aesthetic theory of Jacques Rancière, which emphasizes the necessity of a rupture of the social fabric as a precondition for change, as well as on the theory of radical democracy through the politics of antagonism advocated by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 277-278.
- 4** Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents”, *Artforum* 44, no. 6 (February 2006): 178– 83.
- 5** Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (London: Routledge, 2011).
- 6** Marco Bonazzi, Giulia Cancellieri, and Fabrizio Casarin, “Omnivorous Cultural Consumption and the Co-Creation of Cultural Products: Interactive versus Participatory Art,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 24, no. 1 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14695405231181510>.
- 7** Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, (Van Abbemuseum, 2013), 66
- 8** Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (Kingston, NY: PM Press, 2011).
- 9** James Thompson, *Care Aesthetics: For Artful Care and Careful Art* (London: Routledge, 2023).
- 10** Thomas Munley, “Considering Care as Relational Queer Praxis,” *Art & the Public Sphere* 12, no. 1 (2023): 195–207, https://doi.org/10.1386/aps_00096_1.
- 11** McNally, “Participatory Art and Geography,” 538.
- 12** David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012), 73.
- 13** Stavros Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons* (London: Zed Books, 2016); Stavros Stavrides, *The Politics of Urban Potentiality: Spatial Patterns of Emancipatory Commoning* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).
- 14** McNally, “Participatory Art and Geography,” 546-547.
- 15** Georges Bataille, *La Communauté des Amants* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1961). Bataille’s insights into the fragility of community and the tension between presence and absence, connection and separation are important reference points for both philosophers.
- 16** Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988).

17 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 15–27.

18 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

19 Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 26–30.

20 The connotation of the term “negative” must be carefully interpreted, as it reveals that community is defined by “what is not” (nation, race, religion, etc.) and not by any shared positive substance or identity. In the negative community, individuals are exposed to one another in vulnerability, without mediation by roles, functions, or identities.

21 David Bollier, *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*, (New Society Publishers, 2014); Massimo De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism*, (Zed Books, 2017).

22 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 15–27; Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 26–30; Bollier and Silke Helfrich, *Free, Fair, and Alive: The Commons in the 21st Century*, (New Society Publishers, 2019), 25.

23 Terri L. Barrett, *Making Meaning: Museums, Art, and Public Life*, (Routledge, 2011); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, (Routledge, 1995).

24 Wright, *Lexicon of Usership*, (Van Abbemuseum, 2013).

25 Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010).

26 Jackson, *Social Works*; Bishop, *Artificial Hells*; Jamie Overman, *Participatory Art in the Age of Neoliberalism*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

Zoran Erić is an independent curator and Research Fellow at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade. He holds a PhD from the Faculty of Media, Bauhaus University in Weimar. His research fields include art theory, museology, human geography, urban sociology, and political ecology. He curated and co-curated numerous projects in Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Moldova, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the USA, etc. He contributed to different international art magazines and academic journals including *Artefact* (guest editor of the 4th issue *Glocalogue*); *Umelec*; *Manifesta Journal*; *Praesens*; *Third Text*; *A Prior*; *OnCurating* (guest co-editor of “Precarious Labor in the Field of Art”); *Hermeneia*, *Journal of Hermeneutics*, *Art Theory and Criticism Journal of Museum Education*; *Museum Management and Curatorship Journal*, etc. He published papers in edited volumes with the following publishers: Routledge, Springer, JRP Ringier, NAI Publishers, Phillip Editions, Sternberg Press, Hatje Cantz, DISTANZ Verlag, Revolver Verlag, etc. He was a member of the IKT Board (2005-2008) and the President of the Serbian Section of AICA (2008-2010). He serves on the scientific board of MNAC, Bucharest, and the advisory board of IVAM Valencia, and is a member of CIMAM.

Sarajevo

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art Inauguration: August 22, 2024

Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, developed from the fifteenth century onward as an Ottoman administrative and trading centre. Its Old Town, Baščaršija, remains a living record of that period, with its craftsmen's quarters, covered markets, and some of the oldest mosques in the region. Under Austro-Hungarian administration from 1878, the city was modernised and expanded, gaining tramways, public institutions, and a new urban quarter built in the European style alongside the older Ottoman core. This layering of Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish communities in close proximity gave Sarajevo a multicultural character that shaped its cultural life throughout the twentieth century, including the Socialist Yugoslav period when it served as a significant centre for film, theatre, and the visual arts, and hosted the 1984 Winter Olympics.



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The 1992 to 1996 siege of the city during the wars following Yugoslavia's dissolution caused severe physical and cultural destruction, but also generated a wave of international solidarity. The Ars Aevi Collection of contemporary art was assembled during this period through donations from artists and institutions worldwide and is today one of the most comprehensive contemporary art collections in the region, including works by Marina Abramović, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Jannis Kounellis, and others. A new building for the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art, designed by Renzo Piano, is planned to form the core of a Museums Quarter together with the existing Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina and National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This triangle of institutions represents the broader ambition to connect the city's revolutionary past, its contested national present, and its transnational cultural future within a single urban and institutional framework.

— by Vero Róza Risnovska

Panel discussion:

The Walls That Unite – Building the Museum for the Future

The international Ars Aevi collection, arguably one of the most comprehensive in the region, was founded as an act of solidarity of the art community with the city of Sarajevo that endured an onslaught of destruction and atrocities during the (anti)Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The new and long-awaited building for Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art, designed by architect Renzo Piano, should be the core of the Museum's Quarter in Sarajevo that connects the past and the future with the adjacent building of the Historical Museum (former Museum of Revolution) as well as the National Museum in the vicinity.

The idea of the Museums Quarter was developed in 1948 in the urbanistic plan for 'New Belgrade', the capital city of Socialist Yugoslavia initially built on an unpopulated and marshland terrain that should have signified the genesis of a new country and identity with its administrative and cultural axis. The ideas of Socialist Modernism were never achieved, but in the post-WWII museology, it presents a unique example, much earlier than the realization of MuseumsQuartier in Vienna or the restructured Museumplein in Amsterdam.

Now the city of Sarajevo is facing similar challenges, with an infrastructure that should have a strong influence on the future cultural and artistic scene of the country and the region. The triangle of museums symbolically represents the transnational future, revolutionary past and the troubling national question in an ethnically and administratively polarized country.

The blank white walls - open to citizens for active expression of their feelings, thoughts, and imagination - will serve as a reference for debate on the relation the future museum wants to establish with its publics and constituents from the local communities. Particularly relevant is the question of how the local artistic scene will be incorporated into a highly profiled concept of curated segments of the collection as a model, thereby setting a guiding principle for regional and wider collaborations.

– by Zoran Erić







Panel discussion "The Walls that Unite – Building the Museum for the Future", September 12, 2024 with Senka Ibrišimbegović, Elma Hašimbegović, Mirsad Sijarić, Damir Nikšić, Benjamin Čengić, and Zoran Erić



if walls could tell: A Participatory Stage for Urban Expression

Senka Ibrišimbegović

In the heart of Sarajevo, *if walls could tell* by Mischa Kuball, emerges as a powerful medium for collective storytelling. Situated at the future site of the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art, this participatory project transforms three white walls into a stage for citizen expression. More than a temporary installation, it serves as a conceptual bridge between art, public space, and collective memory.

Traditional museum walls protect and present art, separating the observer from the object. *if walls could tell* subverts this by inviting direct interaction. Citizens leave traces of their thoughts, emotions, and ideas, transforming static surfaces into living entities. Markers, spray paint, and brushes become tools of urban storytelling, capturing Sarajevo's dynamic identity. The participatory nature embodies democratic ideals in public spaces, turning passive observers into active contributors. By incorporating citizens' contributions into its collection, Ars Aevi affirms its commitment to inclusivity and grassroots creativity. The installation bridges institutional and public art, fostering shared ownership over artistic expression.

Located between the Historical Museum and the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the installation fosters a dialogue between history and contemporary expression. The site is also adjacent to the proposed First Transverse, an infrastructure project that threatens the area's cultural coherence. By reclaiming this contested space, *if walls could tell* asserts the value of public spaces as arenas for cultural engagement, promoting their preservation for future generations.

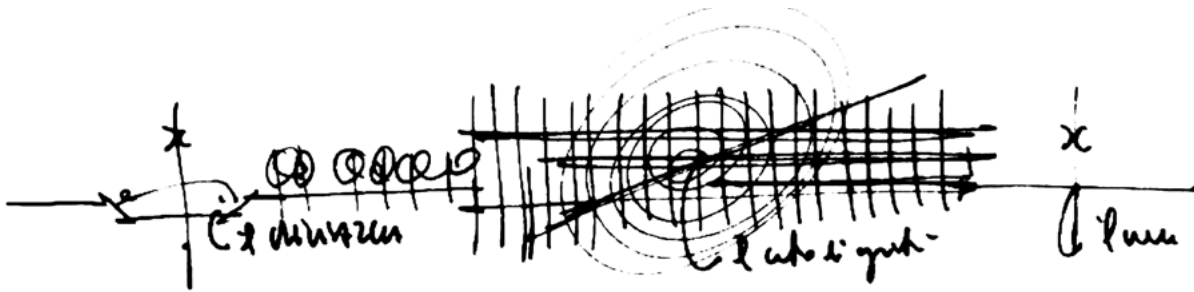
While the walls are temporary, their impact is lasting. Traces left by citizens will be preserved within Ars Aevi's collection, ensuring today's voices remain for future audiences. The interplay between temporary and permanent dynamics underscores the transformative potential of ephemeral urban interventions in shaping long-term cultural narratives.

The installation aligns with the vision of a Museums Quarter — a cohesive cultural hub between the Historical Museum and the National Museum. Through temporary interventions and permanent events, the site already activates public space, advocating for cultural and social values over infrastructural projects. Projects like *if walls could tell* demonstrate how art fosters community and shared purpose, envisioning a future where public spaces enrich rather than merely serve transient needs.

Sarajevo's identity is intertwined with resilience and renewal. The scars of war and reconstruction shape the city's landscape. *if walls could tell* reflects the power of collective memory, preserving citizen expressions as imprints of urban history. By embedding these narratives into Ars Aevi, the installation ensures that Sarajevo's evolving identity remains documented, emphasizing inclusivity, creativity, and dialogue.

if walls could tell is more than an installation; it is a catalyst for change. By inviting citizen engagement, it transforms urban space into a stage for expression and community participation. It challenges traditional notions of art and public space, proving that participatory practices foster cultural preservation and transformation.

As Sarajevo evolves, projects like *if walls could tell* highlight the need to place culture and creativity at the core of urban development. Temporary interventions shape permanent change, ensuring public spaces are not just functional but meaningful. If walls could truly tell, they would speak of a city alive with ideas, resilience, and collective spirit.



Sketch by Renzo Piano, 1999/2000



Ars Aevi Museum, 3D Render by Studio NonStop

Senka Ibrišimbegović was born in Travnik, Bosnia and Herzegovina. She attended high school in Switzerland and graduated from the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Sarajevo, complementing her studies with international programs at Yıldız Technical University Istanbul, MIT Cambridge (2001), and TU Wien (2003). She completed postgraduate studies in Italy at the University of Siena, with a master thesis entitled “*Museum Cultural District – M1 MuseumOne*” in 2004. She began her long-term engagement with the Museum of Contemporary Art Ars Aevi Sarajevo the same year, contributing to the Renzo Piano architectural project and participating in several Venice Biennale editions, including the 53rd Art Biennale (2009), the 15th Architecture Biennale (2016), and serving as Commissioner of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Pavilion at the 58th Art Biennale (2019). She works at the Faculty of Architecture since 2008, earned her PhD in 2015 and became Associate Professor in 2024. Her academic work includes numerous scientific papers and the book *The Art (of) Museum: Creating Contemporary Spaces of Identity, Ars Aevi Sarajevo*. As Director of the Public Institution “City Museums” Sarajevo, she leads the development of the future Ars Aevi Museum. For her contribution to cultural cooperation with Italy, she received the Order of the Star of Italy – *Cavaliere*.

Creating and Curating a Cultural Community

Damir Nikšić

I believe that we should urgently, but not hastily, work on establishing and organizing a museum community in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina and one of the regional centers of culture, science, and art. We should work on creating a type of club centered around three museums: the National Museum (Zemaljski muzej), the Historical Museum, and the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art. This community should have regular and formal gatherings several times a year on specific occasions within the premises of the National Museum and the park between, and it should also have a newsletter and a website as its own online publishing. Most importantly, it should reflect the diversity of people who are lovers of science and art, people from different social categories and professions. It should consist of quality and successful individuals, experts, scientists, artists, but also enthusiastic citizens. Membership of this community would be determined by the proposal of the founders, i.e., by invitation. The mere fact that it resembles a club would mean that it is not open, i.e., that being a member would be an honor, especially when most memberships have lost their value today.

Due to its structure and composition, such a community, with the right online tools, could have a significant impact not only on political decisions in the realm of science and culture but also in the public societal sphere, by combining scientific and artistic content and visual style. I say this aware of the fact that politicians, regardless of what we think of them, care a great deal about public opinion, especially the opinions of esteemed circles and individuals who have a certain influence on shaping public opinion. These individuals, groups and organizations often not only initiate changes but can also turn things in favor of or against the ruling structures, shift the balance of power on the political scene, or influence election campaigns where there are too many actors and competitors. In this sense, an independent artistic-scientific circle or club, a well-organized and well-published community, could achieve a lot. There is no lack of ideas, suggestions, or initiatives, but there is a lack of organization and unity across various fields, disciplines, and passions. Most importantly, there is a lack of socializing, communication, and exchange of ideas. In one word: there is a lack of community.

Talented and educated minds are fragmented and forced into individual or narrowly specialized work, making them easily manipulated by politics and turned into instruments of political leaders and parties. There is a lack of connection between different branches, and a lack of a critical mass of intellectuals and artists who could have a considerable, even decisive influence on society and politics. This should not be difficult, especially considering how small our country and our regions are. There is a lack of notable names, solidarity, tolerance, inclusivity, and a lack of focus and perseverance in our societies. Above all, there is a lack of intellectual and academic expertise, a standard that is not provincial, grotesquely ambitious, and rigid, but measured and tasteful, distinguished, and most importantly, broad.

Currently, there is a lack of an international level, a standard that would show the functionality of certain global civilizational values and united minds in practice, both locally, regionally, and internationally. Many important projects have fallen apart due to human vanity, ego, and the “divide and conquer” mentality. We have learned many new notions during the transition, but we still have not learned the appropriate comportment, or how to function in a community or civil society. I think these three institutions could gather around them the best local and international representatives and this project would be ideal for those who are not afraid of new beginnings and who enjoy creating new and virtuous traditions.

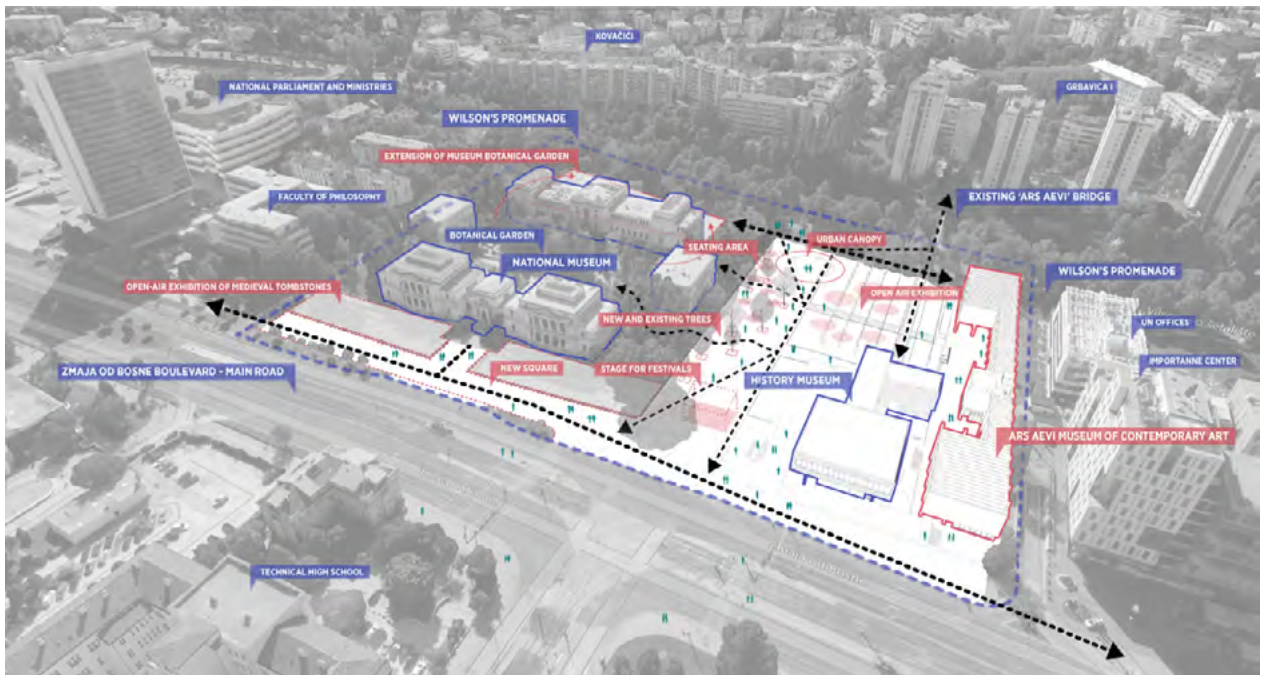
Damir Nikšić is a conceptual artist, performer, and social commentator whose work explores political, social, and cultural themes through a critical and often ironic lens. He graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts Sarajevo in 2000, specializing in painting, and completed his postgraduate studies in 2004 at the University of Arizona, earning a Master of Fine Arts and Art History. Nikšić’s practice spans video, installation, performance, and drawing, often engaging directly with contemporary societal issues, including identity, post-war transition, institutional critique, and global perceptions of the Balkans. His work blends provocation, humor, and sharp political insight, challenging audiences to reconsider entrenched assumptions. He has exhibited extensively across Europe, the United States, and the Balkans, including participation in the Venice Biennale in 2003. Nikšić has been associated with the Maximum Art Group and has developed a reputation for creating accessible art that reaches diverse audiences, frequently using digital platforms to extend the impact of his work. Throughout his career, Nikšić has emphasized the role of the artist as an engaged citizen, advocating for art that interrogates power structures and stimulates dialogue. His oeuvre reflects a commitment to combining conceptual rigor with social consciousness, positioning him as one of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s most prominent contemporary artists.

Visions from the Past

Mirsad Sijarić

An undoubtedly positive development is that concrete steps have finally been taken toward the realization of the Ars Aevi Contemporary Art Museum in Sarajevo and the clustering of the three museums into a central cultural axis. However, skepticism and caution must remain regarding the ability of the Sarajevo Canton authorities to sustain the project’s goals. This view stems from past experience with the relationship between the authorities and existing museum institutions, which have been far from positive. In addition to common issues such as irregular financing and the lack of legal frameworks, particular emphasis has been placed on the absence of a clear vision for managing and steering cultural strategies in a socially beneficial direction, often at the expense of private and semi-private initiatives and ad hoc solutions.

The proposed concept for the “museum zone or quarter,” a planned area encompassing three museums — the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the History Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art — aims to connect these museums via a green belt and pedestrian paths. However, a significant threat to this concept is the fact that local authorities have not abandoned their plans to build a road connection between the National Museum and the other two museums, which could endanger the integrity of Wilson’s Promenade. This road project could destroy the unity of the area and undermine its potential as a space for creative interaction. The proposed road connection not only threatens the museums’ physical structures but also jeopardizes their status as National Monuments of Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Spatial view of Sarajevo’s future Museum quarter by Nermina Zagora/Senka Ibrišimbegović

For these reasons, it is worth reconsidering the previous solutions for the operation of museum institutions, which in the past had a clearly defined social role and legal framework that facilitated effective oversight. The current situation, where many museum institutions operate without a clear vision and struggle to secure basic resources, should be emphasized as a major problem. The lack of direction, coupled with subjective weaknesses, contributes to a decline in standards and leads to compromises that negatively affect both professional expertise and the dignity of these institutions.

Finally, strong support should be given to the idea that cultural professionals must take proactive steps not only to promote the values of cultural institutions to the public but also to engage with political figures who may either fail to understand the importance of these institutions or remain unaware of them.

Mirsad Sijarić was born in 1970 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where he completed elementary and secondary education. After obtaining a university diploma as a Professor of history in Sarajevo, he enrolled in postgraduate school at University of Zagreb (Croatia), where he firstly obtained a master of science degree, followed by doctoral thesis in 2013, entitled “Cold-steel weapons from Bosnia and Herzegovina in the archaeology of the High and Late Mediaeval periods”. From 1996, he has been permanently employed as a curator archaeologist for the Late Medieval period at the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo. In the period between 2010 and 2015 he acted as Head of the Archaeology Department, while he was Acting Director of NMB&H between 2015 - 2025. During the last ten years his main preoccupation was mainly conservation and revitalization of the Museum’s buildings, as well as general management in cultural heritage.

During the course of his career, he published numerous scientific articles and books, exhibition catalogues and school textbooks. In addition to scientific work, he is also a published author within the literature field, with several poetry books and novels. He is also an avid cyclist, amateur gardener and vinyl collector and the winner of the *Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et Lettres de la République française* in 2018.

If Walls Could Tell, They Would Speak the Truth of the Community

Benjamin Čengić

In a community where seven state-funded cultural institutions have unresolved legal and financial status, the idea of a Museum Quarter seems like a utopian vision. However, the fact that the Museum Quarter is to be constructed by building the long-awaited Museum Ars Aevi on site where the two (“orphan”) museums are putting up their fight against cultural decay, offers a certain amount of optimism. As the spatial density of cultural institutions, provided by such a Museum Quarter, could highlight the power and relevance of each, the transformative potential they carry becomes more evident. As the social necessity of those Museums becomes unavoidable, the potential need for investment in them becomes impossible to ignore.

The location of the future Museum Quarter in itself contributes to the development of urban landscape, by broadening what is considered to be “a city center”. Precisely this positions the Museum Quarter as a focal point of social inclusivity – a place equally accessible to all citizens, visitors and tourists.

The lack of city squares, parks and outdoor gathering venues has influenced the use of public space, devaluing it to transport and transition functions only. Therefore, the Vilsonovo šetalište (Wilson’s promenade), located close to the future Museum Quarter, became a mere transit zone. The Museum Quarter opens a possibility for the collective generating of new symbolic and function-related values of Sarajevo public space. The Museum Quarter, as an architectural conglomerate, could be dominant enough to make the people in transit stop for a minute and wonder. Wonder about culture, heritage, space and the meanings around them, which might just be the first step needed for them to enter museums and other galleries.

Therefore, the quarter should not only be the physical space housing the three museums, but a vibrant area rich with closely curated cultural content created within the cooperation of museums, as well as other state and independent cultural institutions. The participatory installation “If walls could tell” by artist Mischa Kuball is a great example of the content a Museum Quarter could and should be hosting. It is an installation that gives the people a space to express themselves, but even more, it gives them an opportunity to personalize the public space they use. In this way, people connect with spaces and they get a chance to inhabit them as their own. They might even feel that they are a part of something bigger than themselves. A community, perhaps.

Benjamin Čengić is a visual artist, muralist, and producer in the field of performing arts, with a particular focus on film production and contemporary art. He graduated from the Academy of Performing Arts in Sarajevo in the Department of Production and Management. After completing his studies, he worked on some of the most significant film projects made in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but his first producer credit, the short film *The Witness*, directed by Alen Šimić, was completed in 2022. In 2016, he founded the association *Obojena Klapa*, which became a key driver for affirming street art in Sarajevo. Through this

platform, Benjamin Čengić initiated and developed projects that redefined the artistic landscape of the city. One of these projects is the *FASADA Festival*, an international street art festival held in Sarajevo since 2021. Through the *FASADA Festival*, the Balkan network of festivals – *BALKAN SAN* – was initiated. In parallel, as the co-founder and director of the Gallery of Contemporary Arts *Manifesto*, established in 2021, Benjamin creates space and support for the development of contemporary artistic practices, including exhibitions, education, and advocacy. Today, he combines the roles of artist and producer, leading projects that connect creativity, innovation, and social impact.

Walk Through Walls

Elma Hašimbegović

The conversation held in September 2024 on the occasion of the inauguration of *if walls could tell*, an installation by artist Mischa Kuball, can be considered historic in many ways. For the first time, three museum directors stepped out from behind the walls of their institutions and gathered at the same table, or, more precisely, in front of the same wall. Each presented their vision of the role of museums, generating synergies and making use of the potential of the space they share. The discussion took place outdoors, in the space between the museums, and attracted a large number of passers-by. It was the first public conversation in the Museum Quarter.

When the Austro-Hungarian administration in Sarajevo built the Landesmuseum, later the National Museum, on the edge of the city, it created an imposing structure: four pavilions and a botanical garden, designed by Karl Paržik. The aim was to present the country's rich and previously unexplored cultural and historical heritage, to introduce the province to Western civilization, and to establish a modern museum housing collections assembled by pioneers of archaeology, ethnology, and the natural sciences. By the time the building was completed, however, the Monarchy was already in its final days.

When the socialist government erected its museum decades later, it too had a clear vision: to construct a new socialist society in the spirit of revolution and a projected future. This was embodied in the modernist building by Boris Magaš, Radovan Horvat, and Edo Šmidihien. Also located on the city's outskirts, the area would only much later develop into the administrative and business hub of the Marijin Dvor neighbourhood. For decades, the two museums operated side by side with little or no contact: the first sustained by the prestige of being the oldest museum, devoted to science and research; the second animated by the ideology of building a new society, content with the stability of the system. They paid little attention to each other during the socialist era, and after the 1990s — under the new socio-political conditions — no one paid much attention to them at all, least of all the government.

At one point, even the tram stop named *Muzeji* (Museums) was renamed *Tehnička škola* (Technical School), a change that passed almost unnoticed, apparently troubling no one. In the early 2000s, plans emerged for a third museum nearby, one linked to the city's recent history and to the solidarity shown by international artists toward the citizens of Sarajevo under siege. This time, the vision was to support the city and its community, to contribute to its physical and spiritual renewal through art, and to position Sarajevo as a significant centre for the international contemporary art scene.

The celebrated architect chosen for this project admired the modernist building of the History Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina and wanted to construct another on the same site, borrowing a little from his Croatian/Yugoslav colleague's work. It would not have been much, just the administrative part of the building, nothing particularly remarkable. Fortunately, the project was later significantly altered, leaving the Magaš building almost intact. Local authorities also welcomed the idea of a new museum,

periodically cutting ribbons and laying foundation stones. Yet more than twenty years have passed, and the museum remains unbuilt.

In the meantime, government attitudes toward museums have barely changed — though the tram stop has once again been renamed *Museums*. What has changed is the surrounding urban fabric: Marijin Dvor has become a dynamic hub of shopping centres and development, with further growth anticipated in line with the capital's needs. More importantly, awareness among us, the museum-goers, has also shifted towards the potential of museums, the importance of the local community, and the inseparability of museums from their surroundings.

The History Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, compelled by circumstances, began to open itself more to the outside world and to its immediate neighbours, exploring ways to connect cultural, educational, and commercial actors in the district. In 2017, the project *Meet the Neighbours* sought to bring all local stakeholders together, positioning the museum as a place of encounter. At the time, we were not yet familiar with the name or concept of the Museum Quarter, but the idea of activating the space between the museums, with its constant flow of people, was always present. Two museums alone can form the nucleus of a museum district, but something more was needed — a new impulse to revive the idea. That impulse came with the more serious steps toward the construction of the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art.

The story of Sarajevo's Museum Quarter is not one of master plans by urban planners or self-styled visionaries (some of whom still dream of a transversal cutting through the two existing museums and a green city oasis). Nor is it a story of "starchitects" transforming urban space into glittering cultural-commercial zones. And, fortunately, it is not a state-sponsored construction project instrumentalised to bolster nationalist policies, as in some neighbouring countries. Its greatest potential lies precisely in the fact that it grew organically, over decades, shaped by architects such as Karlo Paržik, Boris Magaš, Edo Šmidihien, Radovan Horvat, and, finally, Renzo Piano — each working in different historical, social, and political contexts, each striving to create something new and different.

It is now up to us to see whether we can harness this potential, whether we can transform a zone rich in architectural heritage and diverse museum concepts into a vibrant site of cultural exchange, education, economic development, as a recognizable brand of Sarajevo. To begin, it is enough simply to walk through its walls...

Elma Hašimbegović is a historian and museum professional with over two decades of experience in the museum sector, specializing in curatorial practices, museum management, and cultural heritage preservation. Since 2001, she has been professionally affiliated with the History Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, initially as a curator and, since 2013, as the museum's director. Her professional expertise includes the development and implementation of exhibition concepts, strategic institutional leadership, and the positioning of the museum as a platform for education, critical reflection, and public engagement. She has contributed to numerous international cultural, museum and academic projects, with a focus on inclusive museum practices and contemporary approaches to historical narratives.

Bucharest

Romania

The National Museum of the Romanian Peasant Inauguration: August 27, 2024

Bucharest has been the capital of Romania since the nineteenth century and is today the country's political, economic, and cultural centre. The city expanded significantly from the 1860s onward, when Romanian elites educated in France promoted a programme of urban modernisation modelled on Paris, resulting in the wide boulevards, neoclassical public buildings, and bourgeois residential architecture that still characterise parts of the city. This period of growth continued into the inter-war years, one of the most prosperous in Romanian history, during which the city gained further landmarks including the Romanian Athenaeum, now a European Heritage site, and the Royal Palace, today home to the National Museum of Art. The communist period from 1947 brought major upheaval: in the 1980s, Ceaușescu ordered the demolition of large historic neighbourhoods to construct a new civic axis and the Palace of Parliament, the second largest administrative building in the world, while most of the population was housed in standardised concrete apartment blocks.

Since 1989 and Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, Bucharest has developed a more diverse cultural scene. The National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC), opened in 2004 in a wing of the Palace of Parliament, and the Bucharest Biennale, established in 2005, have brought the city into wider European contemporary art networks. The National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, named European Museum of the Year in 1996, and the open-air Village Museum represent the depth of Romania's ethnographic heritage alongside this contemporary engagement. Artistic practice in public space has a long and politically charged history in Bucharest, from the socialist period through the post-



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1989 transition, and the interactions between public institutions, private galleries, the alternative sector, and academic communities continue to shape a lively and contested local artworld.

– by Vero Róza Risnovska

Panel discussion:

Interactive Art in Public Space – The Limits of Participation

The panel discussion will tackle the current theoretical debates on the role of interactive and participatory public art, focusing on their political and social aesthetics. Two different models will be addressed, i.e. interventional space – exploring the potential of participatory public art to reshape everyday life environments; and the commoning space, where participatory art can create shared spaces that can establish common social relations between specific social groups in the urban realm.

With respect to these theoretical models, we suggest yet another position of the artist as catalyst and mediator that sets the “stage” for open-ended participation as a *tabula rasa* - without any filtering, guiding principles or limits imposed upon the potential users/public of the blank white walls. Even though the walls symbolically represent the institutional framework of the Museum from which they were taken and will be returned, the public can perceive them as an empty signifier, not necessarily connected to the discourse of institutional critique.

Herewith, the question that will be raised is whether this kind of interactive artistic practice in public space is merely a temporary “speakers’ corner” or reflects the *vox populi* in the uncontrolled and decolonized public space.

Furthermore, the socio-political, urbanistic, and other contextual layers of the public response to an open and participatory initiative should be pertinent to the local context of Bucharest, where artistic actions in public space had a robust political agenda in the socialist and post-socialist periods.

Finally, an equally important question that will be considered is what are the dynamics of the interactions between the public, private, alternative, academic, institutions, and communities, as well as the publics that constitute and produce the local artworld (via Arthur Danto’s theoretical position).

– by Zoran Erić







Panel discussion "Interactive Art in Public Space - The Limits of Participation", September 14, 2024, with Virgil Ștefan Nițulescu, Ruxandra Demetrescu, Călin Dan, Alina Șerban, Horea Avram, and Zoran Erić



On Monument, Participation and Collective Memory

Horea Avram

Similar to public monuments, the artistic/collective street intervention acts as a vehicle for cultural meaning and collective memory. Such civic compositions, by their very presence, become, as urbanist Christine Boyer put it, “rhetorical topoi.”¹ However, if a monument is conceived and built to mark an event or a personality, its fate is often marked by invisibility and indifference. Instead, participatory street art, precisely because of its participatory and ephemeral character, is subject to a different dialectic of memory and oblivion.

The monument seems incapable of “presentifying” itself, despite the actions which at times are dedicated to it, such as ceremonies or commemorations of the monumentalized person or event.

To presentify means, on the one hand, to be present as a reminder, to remain current, to reiterate the message carried by the monument, and, on the other hand, to be present in an active sense, that is, to remain open to interaction, to make itself, in fact, visible. In contrast, participatory street art is in its essence “presentifiable”, although it has the drawback of being ephemeral and, as such, unforgiving with its own legacy or history. Thus, we can speculate that, in this process, the Latin *oblitare* (oblivion) is contaminated by another Latin term, *obliterare* (to obliterate, to make invisible).

Interventionist actions have the capacity to reinclude street art in the flow of collective memory through a discourse that is always current and updateable. Activating the memory of a piece of street art through participation ultimately leads to a paradoxical result: the artistic intervention becomes a platform of anti-memory. By the latter I mean critical memory, memory that works not by accumulation but by interpretation, by reconversion and reformulation. The artwork, thus renewed, becomes not so much the opposite of the original piece, but rather its alternative, a different possibility of controlling the memory attached to the represented symbols.

As a hypostasis of anti-memory, participatory street art can ultimately become a counter-monument. That is, an object-place that demonstrates anti-monumental strategies, contrary to the traditional monument, in terms of its appearance as an artistic object, the message it conveys and its “duration”. The counter-monument alters the codes of memory as they were originally formulated, proposing instead an alternative and/or critical discourse on the identity of the monument, but also on the political discourse applied to that object and place. Thus, the counter-monument can be seen as the most obvious proof that, as Jacques Rancière has emphasized, “art contains within itself the virtue of resistance.”² And collective diversion, it must be said, is essentially an artistic act that succeeds in making street art a place of reflection and debate, equally permanent and transitory, evocative and participatory.

Notes

1 Christine Boyer, *The city of collective memory*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1996), 321.

2 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 169.

Horea Avram is an art critic, media theorist and independent curator. He researches and writes about art and visual culture in relation to media technology. Avram is an Associate Professor at the Department of Cinema and Media, Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. He has contributed to: *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, (Oxford University Press, 2014), *Theorizing Visual Studies: Writing Through the Discipline* (New York: Routledge, 2013), *Encyclopedia of the imaginaries in Romania*. (Iaşi: Polirom, 2020). Books: *Ex machina. Art, Media and Technology* (in preparation, Cluj University Press, 2025); *ORLAN. Les films des Sainte-Orlan*. (Cluj-Napoca: Intact Cultural Foundation, 2022. Co-editor with F. Ştefan); *The Negotiable Perspective. Essays and Commentaries on Contemporary Artistic Practices* (Cluj: Eikon, 2021); *Moving Images, Mobile Bodies. The Poetics and Practice of Corporeality in Visual and Performing Arts* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018 - editor). He was curator for Romania at the Venice Biennale, 1999. President of AICA-Romania (International Association of Art Critics 2020-2026).

Tapping the Bottom of Reality

Alina Șerban

We live in a world constantly shaped by the voracity with which the political and/or economic boundaries are set and tested, and the individual thresholds are continuously restyled at one's pleasure. We base our common ground on agreed regulations, perfected laws, and conventional guidelines. We are concerned with edges and vicinities but most of the time our interests reflect the simple impulse to evict any oddity existing close to us, any incongruity which might contrast with the general expectations of life or might impede what society urges us to do. Nowadays, the online space has become the preferred medium in the dissemination of the basic norms and standardised perspectives regarding the human condition, a free-to-take education, open for all, pleasing our eyes and minds with hopes of an effortless success and the mirage of an uncomplicated happiness.

In virtual reality anyone can play, adjust their own terms and normalise their relationships. Scrolling up and down the social sites and the various online platforms outlines the inner principle of this new agora, respectively that to remain virtually alive means to play the proactive card. One has to feed, in real time, the social networks in order not to be forgotten. Subjects, themes, memos, motivational discourses, petitions, and creative writing are flowing non-stop. People unleash their spirits and behind the monitor act in good will. What happens in the backyard of our everyday life — that life that we actually live, at home where we sleep, where we take our medications, go shopping, and pay our bills? One could say that it looks disconnected from the other self that posts something to the world every day. Are we as proactive in reality as we are online? Can we address the world in another way, allowing other (physical) zones of individual and collective negotiation to emerge, other forms of expressing ourselves and building collaborative dialogues?

I propose we turn the lens towards the public space. It has changed profoundly. The public space we knew in the 1990s, then in 2000s is not the same. It has become even more regularised, privatised, and monopolised by commercials. Sometimes, it looks like an addendum of the online space. Still, the question that one can pose, after more than thirty-five years since the fall of the Iron Curtain, is how to tap the foundation of reality we all share today? How do we capture the authentic feeling that draws people and influences their destinies? We can certainly ask ourselves if the civic centre might still be the ideal place for art to project scenarios, to collect feedback and engage in conversations with various communities?

There is certainly a new dynamic. Topics that once concerned art in the public sphere are effectively reconfigured as the mindset of people changed as well. And the centre of the city is not the right place to search for the fundamental concerns nurturing or torturing the society's body, as there the terrain seems to be cleansed of any dirt. But the spaces of transit, the residual territories and the margins of the city expose involuntarily the pitfalls of our enchanted and reformed reality. When we commute everyday by train, bus or metro, we sense the current social and economic emergences and the political slippages which contrast with the glossy picture kept safe by our computer screens. It has become evident that art's presence in the public space is not a one-time trial. On the contrary, it is a long and enduring process of adaptation, listening and

establishing trust with individuals, communities, or institutions. Art has the potential to give back to society what the charming stories and posts shared online do not: the possibility to doubt, to refuse idealisation and show the fragility of our lives, the cracks behind the shiny floors, the bitter taste of economic inequality. The task of art is not to decorate the vitrine of public sphere, but to slowly peel its layers away until it reaches its core.

Alina Şerban is a researcher, curator and publisher. She is co-founder of the Institute of the Present (Bucharest) and founder of the publishing programme P+4 Publications. Her work explores exhibition histories and the non-linear historiographies of post-war Eastern European art, with particular attention to their specific theoretical and social contexts of manifestation. She places a strong emphasis on oral histories and artistic archives. Şerban was the grant recipient of the Igor Zabel Award for Culture & Theory (2022). Her recent projects include *Matei Bejenaru: Songs for a Better Future* (Moderna Galerija, MSUM, Ljubljana), *Rewritten Topographies* (Braşov Art Museum), and *Karton Tandem*, a magazine devoted to experimental photography and literary writing.

Rethinking the Functions of the Museum from Its Origins to the Present Day

Ruxandra Demetrescu

Can civil society live without museums, and will this dissolve or break the cultural promise to future generations? What are the interactions between society, museums, citizens, artists and curators?

– Mischa Kuball

Starting from Mischa Kuball's fundamental questions regarding the role/goal of the museum today, I thought that reviewing the history of the museum as a modern institution, we are able to identify some interesting points and aspects.

Jean Louis Déotte thematizes the paradox embodied by l'Abbé Grégoire, the constitutional bishop and author of reports on vandalism and the destruction of cultural and political property (1794), as an instigator of the museum and conservator of arts and crafts, by mentioning the "strange complicity between the museum and human rights".¹

The educational dimension was initially the classic principle of museums twinned with art academies as one of the museum's four missions in its early days was to become a "place of inspiration for artists and scholars".²

A current discourse in contemporary museology recalls the "museum outside the museum"³: the museum, outside the traditional exhibition space, represents in a certain sense an act of freedom finalized in an act of artistic research. This would be a form of liberation from "museological tyranny", and if we take the term 'muséalisation',⁴ which implies creating a correspondence between the museum and the world by placing objects in spaces other than the museum, we are witnessing a genuine delocalization of museology, a temporary, often definitive conversion of places that are unusual, disparate, and open.

In an attempt to redefine the museum, Bernard Deloche proposed the following formulation: "the museum is a specific function, which may or may not take the form of an institution, whose objective is to ensure, through sensitive experience, the archiving and transmission of culture, understood as the set of acquisitions that make a human being genetically human".⁵ Without dwelling on all the connotations, I would mention only the distinction between function and institution, which, according to the author, opens the way for many substitutes to recognize the status of the museum, given that there are other means of exercising the same function.

The debate around the new definition (ICOM) of the museum was – and still is – emblematic of the controversies around the museum as a fundamental institution. The ICOM definition was never accepted (Kyoto, 2019), and proposed a radical transformation:

Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve,

*research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.*⁶

The former ICON definition, formulated in 2007, reaffirmed the conventional status of the museum: *a museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.*

I think that Costanzo's and Deloche's statements may be regarded as strong reactions to this definition and I am convinced that their message is still true. Mischa's installation, in the proximity of two museums from Bucharest (the Museum of the Romanian Peasant and the Museum of Contemporary Art) is another response to the dilemmatic condition of the museum in our troubled time. The involvement of the public was in both cases crucial, in a performative act that assumed a political, cultural and - last but not least - an ironic response. Thus, Mischa's own statement interacted with the numerous anonymous voices of the public. Combining artistic research with a curatorial challenge, Mischa Kuball created a reachable "museological" installation outside the museum, delocalising the canonic museology and challenging the museological tyranny in an act of artistic freedom.

Notes

1 Jean-Louis Déotte; *Oubliez! Les ruines, l'Europe, le musée*, (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1994), 56-58.

2 Antoine Chrysostôme Quatremère de Quincy, *Les considerations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l'art* (text reviewed by Jean Louis Déotte), (Paris: Fayard, 1989)

3 Michele Costanzo, *Museo fuori dal museo*, (Milano: Francoangeli, 2007)

4 Pierre Alain Mariaux, „Epitaphe?“, in *Les lieux de la muséologie*, ed. Pierre Alain Mariaux, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 1-5.

5 Bernard Deloche, „Definition du musée“, in *Vers une redefinition du musée?*, ed. Francois Mairesse, Andre Desvallees, (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2007), 93-103.

6 “ICOM announces the alternative museum definition that will be subject to a vote”, July 25, 2019, <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/>

Ruxandra Demetrescu (b. 1954) is an art historian and professor of art history and theory at the Department of Doctoral Studies of the National University of Arts in Bucharest, Romania, where she teaches art theory, museum studies and modern Romanian art. She was the Rector of the National University of Arts in Bucharest (2006–2012) and the first Director of the Romanian Cultural Institute in Berlin, Germany (1999–2003). Her research focuses are the history of art theories in German-speaking space (Konrad Fiedler, Alois Riegl, Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin) and Romanian interwar artistic modernity. She held the *Arnheim Professur* at the Humboldt University in the fall of 2012. She coordinated research projects: VISART, *Platform for Conservation of Contemporary Art*, (2012-2016); *Dismantled museums in Bucharest. Museological concept and European models at the beginning of the 20th century. The case of the Kalinderu Museum* (2007-2008). In the last decade, she curated solo shows of contemporary Romanian artists and published numerous texts in Romanian contemporary visual artists' exhibition catalogues.

T. A. Z.

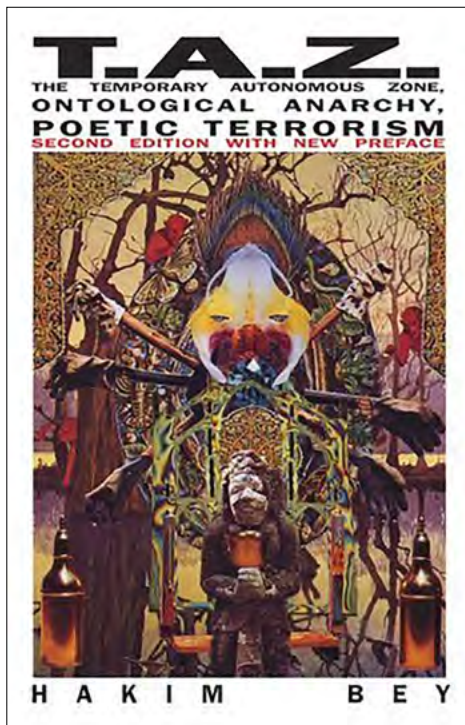
Călin Dan

Being invited by my friend Zoran Erić to be part of this travelling project authored by our distinguished colleague Mischa Kuball has been a source of intellectual happiness. *if walls could tell* was the perfect environment for someone who, like me, is confronted day by day with challenging situations, while trying to keep alive an institutional paradigm that does not really fit the times we live in. Museums are mostly seen as symptoms of the evolutions in society. I prefer a more ambitious approach, and propose museums as *evolving paradigms* that are not just reflecting, but actually (re)shaping reality to the extent that makes them more relevant than even museum professionals would like to concede.

Precisely due to their symbolic and pragmatic significance, museums have been submitted to a plastic surgery-like procedure meant to give them a certain appeal that was never there and to hide the wrinkles that were actually the sign of a noble and active life. The botox of political correctness has inflated museums' profiles, transforming them into an unrecognisable (to me at least) creature, a sort of mother-of-all-real-and-imagined-needs that a society of leisure can imagine.

Nursery, elementary-to-high-school-to-college classroom, night club, day lounge, theatre podium, neighbourhood kulturhaus, creative hub, social hub, meeting point, matting point, gourmet restaurant, cinema, yoga club, fitness club, luxury shop, bookshop,





Cover of the book
T.A.Z.: Temporary Autonomous Zone
 by Hakim Bey.

wine shop, anything... No matter how imaginative a museum director and his team could be, there is always something amiss, some magic service that the museum could cater for – and does not. People are nowadays so easily outraged....

With this mind frame I agreed to participate in Mischa's project and it worked for me at least as an instrument for gaining some clarity about my own job, and also for stepping beyond some accumulated frustrations. Hopefully it also worked for the MNAC's visitors, because the soft walls invented by Mischa and hosted by our museum could be compared to the Speakers's Corner in Hyde Park, allowing anyone and everyone to have a (public) voice. However, they are also more than that – an ineffable substitute for the walls of the institution itself, untouchable to the layman. Inspired, or just dull, funny, quirky or presumptuous, the texts and drawings scribbled on the MNAC's walls simulacra offered to us by Mischa Kuball grant an unexpected moment of freedom to the museum visitor. If that freedom is critical to the museum, so be it. If it has another aim, even one difficult to swallow, it is also okay.

This temporary 'freedom space' installed on one of MNAC's terraces makes visible another concept, which for me is the quintessential description of what a museum should be nowadays. First of all – as a museum of *art*, the MNAC values above all else the concept of artistic *autonomy*. This is not to be mistaken with the concept of aesthetic autonomy, the autonomous dimension of art production ensuring that in any culturally oriented activities, any socially determined ingredients, from political, to economic, religious, humanitarian, ecological, and racial, have to be *implicit*, and by no means made explicit. Only art created under this axiomatic principle can provide the viewer with the surplus value that makes a difference between straightforward cultural experience and manipulative propaganda.

Museums in general are historically well equipped to encourage autonomy, not only of art, but of any other content that can be thought of. Expanding on this, I would say that today's museums have the obligation to become *Temporary Autonomous Zones*,

for many reasons. If we look at the history of this concept, as shaped by late Peter Lamborn Wilson, a.k.a. Hakim Bey in 1991, we realise that temporality and autonomy are precious qualities that are not so much encouraged by societies, even now. Everybody is obsessed with a hedonistic aspiration to eternity, with permanence, and everybody is ready to trade freedom for safe conformity to norms. Being beyond norms, being independent, even for a day, is scary, but it is also an important part of the human condition. Without autonomy in its different forms, humanity would have not survived. At least not in the spectacular ways it did, until now at least. Thus, it is up to us, museum people, to offer the space and means for revisiting autonomy, for enjoying it, and for reflecting on its qualities.

It is a valuable paradox that we should take from here – museums, as homes for the permanent values we rely upon are also potentially zones of autonomy that could breed another type of social interaction through culture.

Călin Dan is a visual artist with a background in art history and theory. He reached international recognition with the group subREAL, and independently with the long-term projects *Emotional Architecture* (2002-present), *Anturaju' and Other Stories* (2006-2010), and *Collective Authorship* (2012-present). After 1989, he was advisor to the Mondriaan Fund and Pro Helvetia Romania, and leader to cultural institutions like “Arta” magazine, and the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art, Bucharest. Currently, he is the director of the National Museum of Contemporary Art – MNAC Bucharest, where he elaborates strategies of recuperation, giving a platform for local conceptual artists from the 1970s and 1980s, while starting a regional network meant to define a significant cultural pole for artists and curators active in the former communist countries. His work was showcased at the Biennales of Venice, Istanbul, Sao Paulo, Sydney, and at the festivals: Ars Electronica, Linz; DEAF (Dutch Electronic Arts Festival), and Film Festival, Rotterdam; Media, film and video festival Osnabruck; Internationale Kurzfilmtages, Oberhausen; OSTranenie. Video Forum an der Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau, Videonale Bonn, etc. He is also a recipient of the Special Media Award of the Experimental Film Festival, Split (2000) and of the Videonale Bonn award (2001).

Always Changing Museum

Virgil Ștefan Nițulescu

Collecting objects is a natural feature of human beings. The first ever historically attested collection was in antique Babylon. Since then, a few millennia later, collections manifested and became museums and they are, continuously, redefined. The last “classical” definition of museums was adopted by ICOM in Vienna, in 2007: “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment”. Since 2016, when the ICOM General Conference took place in Milan, the world has changed. The ‘winds of change’ moved like a tsunami through museums, with a powerful demand for adapting the institutions to society. The wave of political correctness and the subsequent ‘woke movement’ has shackled the tranquil world of museums. A revolution in defining museums was therefore instigated. The new definition, motioned in 2019 in Kyoto, was a true shock: “Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing”.

The change was so radical that the motion failed and the decision was postponed for 2022, in Prague, when a much calmer definition was, almost unanimously, adopted: “A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing”.

The pressure on museums was administered by people inside them: professionals coming from the active civic movements, fighting for democratising the cultural institutions. In their vision, museums should not be passive witnesses to political life, but true fighters for values like social inclusion and sustainable development, for human rights (especially for all kind of minorities) and equality.

Though the most radical definition was not adopted, a significant proportion of curators considered that there is an open conflict between museums and their public, that a part of the public does not consider museums to be their true property, as they do not have input into the way exhibitions are organised. Exhibitions are considered truly powerful statements of curators, expressions of their will against the powerless public. Is this true?

The answer is not so clear. When a musician chooses the repertoire, the public is not asked. When a theatre director makes a certain artistic choice, it is a very personal one. Why should museums be any different? The answer lies in a common belief (incorrect, in my opinion), that museums are not personal works of art, but collective approaches. Unlike theatres and cinema halls, museums are generally considered expressions of the entire society, and thus, they should convey the general spirit of the community. This is the main reason why the public frequently feels displaced from museums, by not having meaningful input.

The public installation initiated by Mischa Kuball tries to give a voice to those who feel frustrated about the perceived “dictatorship” of curators. It is an ongoing experiment. No one could give a final answer about what the public wants, first of all, because usually, the public has a unique voice and opinion only in times of crises, when people are united against something. Leaving to individuals the freedom to express their own thoughts, without external pressure, without guidance and in, more or less, peaceful times, would dissolve issues and contestations.

This is possibly the most powerful message of Mischa Kuball’s challenge: democracy is not about unanimity. Once the walls settle, themselves, in a museum, they would speak about differences in opinions, in thoughts and attitudes, about the huge diversity reflected in democratic societies. *if walls could tell* is a project which could not be accepted in dictatorships and, even if it would be, would prove nothing. In the end, true museums are truly democratic institutions.

Virgil Ștefan Nițulescu is a museologist and manager of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant (2010 – 2016 and since 2019), with a PhD in History at the “Lucian Blaga” University in Sibiu. A former curator in the Ialomița County Museum (1984 – 1988) and in the National Museum of History of Romania (1988 – 1990), Nițulescu joined the Ministry of Culture, as counsellor and general director (1990 – 1995) and, then, the House of Deputies, as counsellor to the Committee on Culture (1995 – 2005). He occupied different positions in the Ministry of Culture (Secretary of State, counsellor to the minister, General Secretary, Head of Cabinet (2005 – 2009 and 2017 – 2019) and in the General Secretariat of the Government (as governmental inspector, 2009 – 2010) and worked, as director, editor-in-chief and editorial team member for the Romanian Journal for Museums, *Revista muzeelor* (1995 – 2025). He worked as associate professor at different universities and has had many positions in international professional organisations, including the International Council of Museums, European Museum Forum or European Museum Academy, since 1993. Nițulescu has published hundreds of articles, both in scientific journals as in cultural magazines.

Skopje

North Macedonia

Museum of Contemporary Art Skopje Inauguration: December 19, 2024

Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia, has been continuously inhabited since at least 4000 BC and has served as a Roman, Byzantine, Bulgarian, Serbian, and Ottoman centre at different periods of its history. The city's Old Bazaar, one of the largest and best preserved in the Balkans, its Ottoman-era hammams and caravan-serais, and the medieval Kale fortress above the Vardar River are the most visible traces of this layered past. In the twentieth century Skopje developed as an industrial city within Socialist Yugoslavia, a period that also produced significant cultural institutions including the National Gallery and the Museum of Contemporary Art. On 26 July 1963 a major earthquake destroyed approximately 80 percent of the city's buildings. The international reconstruction effort that followed produced a substantial body of Brutalist and Socialist Modernist architecture, a heritage that is today under-documented and at risk.

The Museum of Contemporary Art Skopje was founded in 1964 directly out of the earthquake response, when artists, institutions, and collectors from around the world donated works to the city as an act of solidarity. The resulting collection includes works by Picasso, Calder, Vasarely, Léger, and Christo, and remains the institutional and ethical foundation of the museum's programming today. From 2010 onward, the city centre was substantially altered by the government-led "Skopje 2014" initiative, which introduced neoclassical facades, new public monuments, and an equestrian statue of Alexander the Great as part of a project to construct historical connections between the contemporary Slavic nation of Macedonians and classical antiquity. The initiative has been widely criticised for fuelling ethnic tensions, displacing the city's actual modernist heritage, and failing to create adequate public spaces for civic life.



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The Museum of Contemporary Art, situated on a hill above the city, has maintained its focus on regional and international programming in this contested urban context.

– by Vero Róza Risnovska

Panel discussion:

Two-Way Alley – Melting Down the Museum Fortification

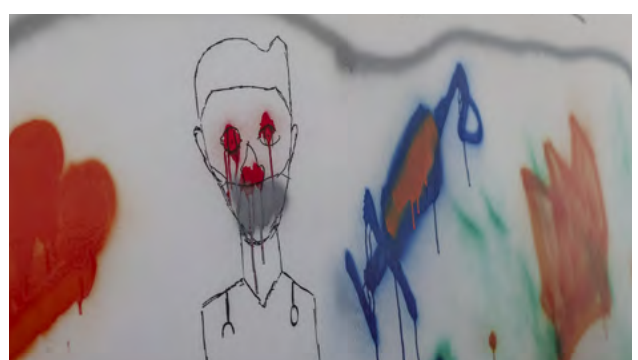
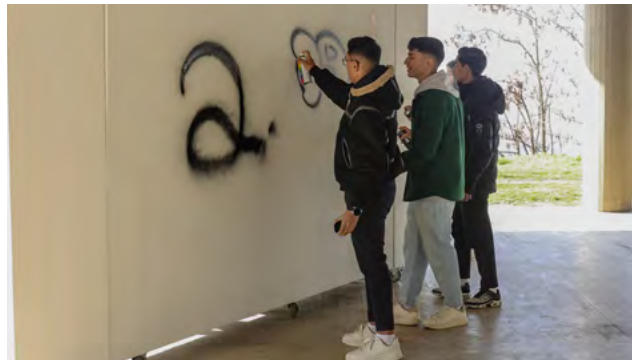
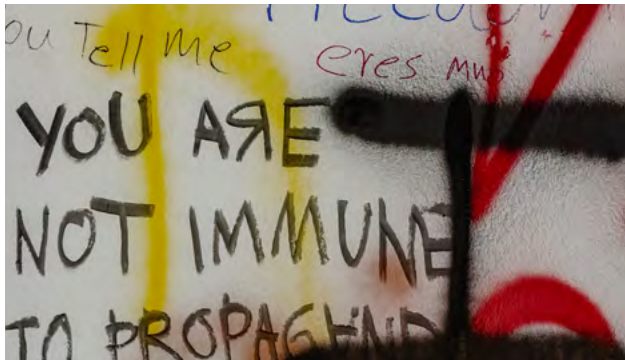
The Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje is situated on a hill overlooking the city, somewhat isolated from the array of public monuments introduced under the “Skopje 2014” initiative. These monuments function as symbols of a national ideological project, constructing a “false identity” and fabricating historical connections between the contemporary Slavic nation of Macedonians and their counterparts from classical antiquity. The proliferation of monuments, such as the equestrian statue of Alexander the Great, reflects a dominant ideological narrative promoted by political elites. However, the statues in public spaces also feature a variety of seemingly arbitrary figures, including musicians and a woman walking in the pedestrian zone, which contribute to the populist and, at times, obscure character of this public art.

A decade after the launch of this project, which has fuelled ethnic tensions and now faces legal challenges, Skopje is widely recognized as a “city of monuments,” yet it lacks adequate public spaces for civic engagement. This raises a critical question: What is the potential role of participatory art in public spaces designed to engage citizens?

In this context, the Museum of Contemporary Art, positioned like an “island” or fort, continues to focus on cutting-edge regional and international programs and exhibitions. The central question for this panel discussion is: How can participatory public art catalyse debates that symbolically mark the beginning of the process of creating a “monument” (Jochen Gerz)? Furthermore, how might this form of artistic practice be perceived in a city saturated with “bronze sculptures” that reinforce a mythology-based narrative, rather than reflecting the social realities of an ethnically divided city and country?

– by Zoran Erić







Panel discussion "Two-Way Alley – Melting Down the Museum Fortification", December 21, 2024 with Sofia Grigoriadou, Vladimir Janchevski, Slobodanka Stevceska, Prof. Nebojsa Vilić, and Zoran Eric



Out of Place in Constantly Changing Cities

Sofia Grigoriadou

According to a spatial approach to social relations that came about with the cultural shift in urban studies and geography in the 1980s, sociality and materiality are interconnected. The landscape is not a container for action, but happens together with it.¹ Despite the widespread understanding of places as fixed and eternal, they are relational, under negotiation and open to conflict, contingency and the political, constantly in the making.²

Our immersion and “entrapment” in the materiality and temporalities of a place can potentially allow for complex, embodied understandings of the power relations places are made of.³ Situated and intersectional feminist and queer approaches to phenomenology highlight how gender, race, social class, and ability affect the ways in which one perceives, accesses and feels (dis)comfort in a place that has been afforded the status of neutrality by privileged bodies and dominant narratives.⁴ How does a disabled person navigate pavements blocked with parked cars? How does it feel to walk under the gaze of sculptures of heroic men when the walkers are women or other marginalized genders?

Urban regeneration plans, public sculptures, artist interventions, graffiti – everything that appears in public space – is not merely decorative, nor is it a neutral backdrop to everyday life. It is loaded with political and social meanings and acts on the residents and passers-by, affecting where and how they move and what they look at, as well as stirring official and individual memories. As many different actors are involved in the shaping and claiming of public spaces, albeit in asymmetrical ways, these spaces become scenes for addressing and acting out public life,⁵ open to dissent, contestation and social (ant)agonism.

Spaces are characterised by polysemy, as the individuals, groups and structures that use and shape them have different aspirations or perceptions of them, often deviating from those planned or expected. Where dominant discourses, normative gender roles and national and class boundaries are affirmed, they can also be challenged and undermined. The same monument on the main square, the same writing or stain made of paint on the facade of a building, the same art intervention in public space all tell different stories to different people and affect them in different ways.

Public art participates in this constant dialogue and shaping of the cityscape. Often, it celebrates established power and ideas, not necessarily in conscious or easily perceived ways. Or it may question or disrupt truths, narratives and processes that are taken for granted. Graffiti, slogans, or tags also claim space, transforming city walls into stages of address, where non-linear dialogues take place daily.⁶ Even self-referential tags/signatures that are not intended to be read and understood by those who do are not part of the graffiti cultures communicate with passers-by, if not with a clear message, then as images that “transcend the letters” that compose them;⁷ as agents that stimulate reactions. They are often considered dangerous, or “out of place”⁸, as they may appear incomprehensible and unsettling, or undermine public consent, and the plans for a tidy, agreeable city facade. Street art is not necessarily perceived with similar concerns,⁹ especially when it is made with official permission or funding.

The institution tends to integrate all that is new, interesting and challenging. In doing so, it may make it more visible and acceptable, securing it a place in the archive. Bearing in mind that the “wilding” of the public sphere is no longer unambiguous at a time when confidence in established, clear worldviews has been shaken,¹⁰ let us also consider that integrating all that is new, interesting and challenging may also render it less “dangerous” to official truths and the (exclusionary) values of order and cleanliness.

Notes

- 1 Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments*. (Oxford; Providence: Berg, 1994)
- 2 Doreen B. Massey, *For Space* (London; Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2005; Yalouri, Eleana, Γιαλούρη, Ελεάνα. 2010. “Η Δυναμική των Μνημείων” [The Dynamics of Monuments], in Αμφισβητούμενοι Χώροι στην Πόλη [Contested Spaces in the City], ed. Kostas Yiannakopoulos and Yiannis Yiannitsiotis. (Athens: Alexandraia, 2010), 349–80.
- 3 Christopher Tilley, and Wayne Bennett, *The Materiality of Stone*. (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2004)
- 4 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006)
- 5 Stavros Stavridis, *Από την πόλη οθόνη στην πόλη σκηνή [From the City-Screen to the City-Stage]*. (Athens: Nissos, 2002)
- 6 Pafsaniias Karathanasis. “Οι τοίχοι της πόλης ως «αμφισβητούμενοι χώροι»: Αισθητική και αστικό τοπίο στην Αθήνα”, [City Walls as ‘Contested Spaces’: Aesthetics and Urban Landscape in Athens], in Αμφισβητούμενοι Χώροι στην Πόλη [Contested Spaces in the City], ed. Kostas Yiannakopoulos and Yiannis Yiannitsiotis. (Athens: Alexandraia, 2010), 315-348.
- 7 Orestis Pangalos, “Testimonies and Appraisals on Athens Graffiti, Before and After the Crisis”, in *Remapping ‘Crisis’: A Guide to Athens*, ed. Myrto Tsilimpounidi and Aylwyn Walsh. (Alresford: Zero Books, 2014), 154-176.
- 8 See Tim Cresswell, *In Place—Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005 [1966])
- 9 Pafsaniias Karathanasis, 2010, *op.cit.*
- 10 Nancy Fraser, “Climates of Capital” *New Left Review*, 127 (February 2021), 94–127.

Sofia Grigoriadou (Athens, Skopje) is an artist, anthropologist, curator and educator. She holds a PhD in Social Anthropology (Panteion University, Athens) and a BA and MFA in visual arts (Athens School of Fine Arts), and a BA in Philosophy-Pedagogy-Psychology (School of Philosophy, University of Athens). She is co-founder of TWIXT-lab, a laboratory between contemporary art, the social sciences and everyday life in Athens. She was a co-founder of the interdisciplinary group Akoo-o and was a member of the editorial team of publishing initiative kyklada.press. She is also a guest curator of Video Art Miden. She has taught contemporary art at the ASFA and organized workshops and seminars at TWIXTlab on contemporary art and anthropology. In 2024 she worked at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje curating the screenings programme, co-editing *The Large Glass* magazine, and co-curating exhibitions. She is currently an Adjunct Lecturer in anthropology and visual culture at the Department of Culture and Creative Media and Industries (University of Thessaly, Greece).

Artistic Practices in a Shifting Public Sphere Slobodanka Stevceska

“Alexander Is Not Dead, Long Live Alexander!” was the title of the performative lecture we delivered in Athens in 2018. It took place during a pivotal moment in our practice, highlighting a transition from our previous models to an approach that, at first glance, may seem radically different. However, this shift happened naturally — as a logical evolution of our work and a response to necessity. It reflects two particular practices that engage with and address the public sphere. In this text, I will provide brief insight into the reasons behind this decision.

Founded in 2001 by Denis Saraginovski and myself, OPA (Obsessive Possessive Aggression) is an artistic duo based in Skopje. From the outset, our work has focused on context-specific practices that respond to rapid social and political changes. These circumstances often required immediate responses, so our works frequently took the form of interventions, subversive actions, and constructed situations. Collaborative processes have also played a crucial role in these activities, as well as in those that followed. Borrowing tools from marketing, mass media, and propaganda methods, our practice evolved into strategies such as tactical media, mockumentaries, over-identification, and subversive affirmation. By adopting methods originally developed in non-artistic domains, we found powerful tools to address reality.



Solution, Obsessive Possessive Aggression (2012, Skopje Kreativa Festival), billboard work adopting the language of advertising to address rising religiosity, generating public debate and subsequent censorship. Photo by OPA.



ContraContraBeacon, Obsessive Possessive Aggression (2016, group exhibition Sculptural), object transforming the Museum of Contemporary Art Skopje into a lighthouse transmitting a Morse-code call for critical thought in relation to authoritarian narratives. Photo by OPA.



Think Big!, Obsessive Possessive Aggression (2017, Autostrada Biennale), public intervention in Prizren staging a fictional monument to Donald Trump, foregrounding layered histories of power and erasure within a contested urban site. Photo/design by OPA.

- ❶ Archaeological findings most likely from the Roman classical period.
- ❷ The remaining minaret of the Arasta Mosque. The mosque, built in the XVI century, was destroyed in 1963 with the pretext of "modernizing" Prizren.
- ❸ Modernist buildings built in the 1960s on the site of what was once the Arasta Mosque.
- ❹ A monument erected in honor of the 45th President of the United States Donald Trump. It is placed on the remains of a neglected monument, whose six bronze portraits were dedicated to Second World War heroes.

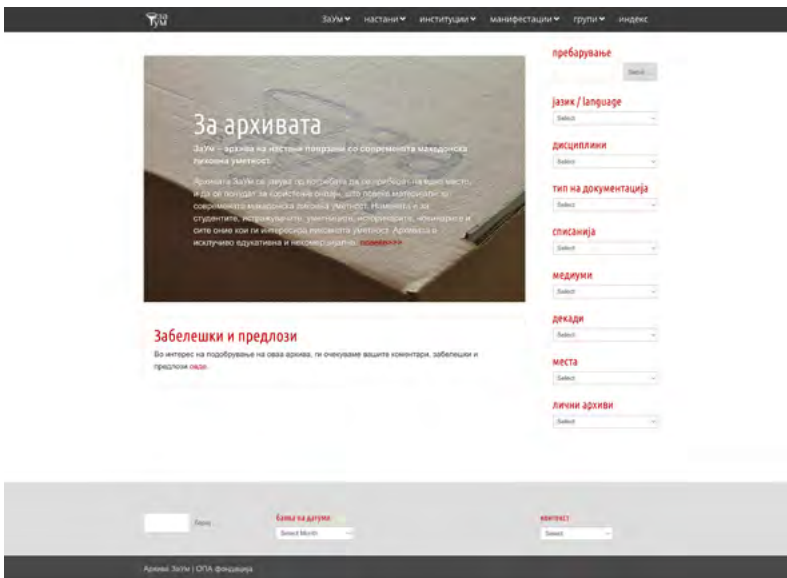
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THINK BIG!

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Later, these subversive strategies proved particularly effective in a nationalist, authoritarian context — a period marked by irrationality and the dominance of ethnocentric narratives in public discourse. Public spaces became battlegrounds claimed through aesthetic tools ranging from media manipulation to the grandiose aestheticization of politics. In such a charged environment, these tactical practices — often perceived as peculiar or unexpected — served as catalysts for public debate and broader dialogue. Primarily realized in public spaces, these interventions gained impact through widespread circulation in mass media and social networks, which were at their peak during that time. Embraced by the community, they evolved into open tools for public engagement.

Inevitably, over time, the models and tools developed and adapted by artists were appropriated by political entities. The public sphere and media became flooded with alternative truths, fabricated narratives, and manipulated images, creating a climate of confusion and disarray. In this environment, the effectiveness of subversive practices began to wane or required rethinking.



ZaUm Archive, Obsessive Possessive Aggression (2017–ongoing), open-access online platform dedicated to the digitization and preservation of endangered materials related to Macedonian modern and contemporary art, comprising over 7,000 documented events. Layout by OPA.

Another turning point was the fall of the nationalist government and the rise of a critical mass, which brought renewed hope and enthusiasm. For us, shifting to a different approach became a logical step — a transition toward utilitarian, constructive practices. This new direction focused on contributing to the community while exploring models that would be both applicable and effective within the given social, political, and cultural context. Borderline practices that involve the community — serving either as educational models or tools — became the focus of these activities. These practices aim not only to provide practical and useful outcomes but also to serve as proposals and interventions within the specific socio-political context.

However, political elites, entrenched in populist frameworks, continue to evade systemic issues. The dominant discourse remains fixated on reinforcing private interests. In this context, advancing and implementing innovative, context-specific artistic practices that address political realities and engage with the public sphere remain critically important.

Slobodanka Stevceska is a visual artist whose practice is context-based, non-collectible and often ephemeral. Since 2001, she has been a member of the art duo OPA (Obsessive Possessive Aggression) [www.o-p-a.org], working with strategies ranging from parody, altered realities, mockumentaries, tactical media, and subversive affirmation to more utilitarian and constructive artistic approaches in recent years. Stevceska has had solo exhibitions in Macedonia, Croatia, France, Germany, Estonia, the United States, the Netherlands, and has exhibited widely in group exhibitions such as *Transmediale* (Berlin), *Trans-europa* (Hildesheim), *Free-waves' Biennial of New Media Arts* (Los Angeles), *Biennale of Contemporary Art* (Moscow), and *Ars Electronica* (Linz). She is a co-founder of ZaUm Archive (<https://arhiva.zaum.mk>), an online platform dedicated to preserving materials related to Macedonian modern and contemporary art. Stevceska was also a co-founding member of the Kooperacija Initiative (2012–2015) and the Forms of Ownership collective (2018–2021).

Contemporary Art and the Tries to Reclaim Public Space: Is There Any Space Left for Re-thinking the Contemporary? Vladimir Janchevski

We would like to think that contemporary art in public space plays a crucial role in shaping our shared environments and collective consciousness. Far from being mere decoration, we usually believe it becomes a powerful mode of communication, critique, and engagement. There are many valuable theoretical lenses through which to understand this phenomenon, particularly in how public art intersects with media, politics, and cultural identity. What can we develop further from, for example, Vilém Flusser's skepticism of the political potential in a post-historical image-saturated, and increasingly conflictual, violent anti-political world, or Boris Groys' analysis of the practices dwelling on the borderline of art and activism and a renewed hope based on the importance of art agency?

Flusser was probably right that our ways of thinking and perceiving are deeply shaped by the tools and media we use. In his concept of the "technical image," Flusser suggests that contemporary forms of communication — especially images — are no longer passive reflections of reality but actively construct meaning.

Public art, particularly in urban environments, functions similarly; it does not merely represent the city, but shapes how we understand and inhabit it. When contemporary artworks are placed in public space, they become part of the media landscape and are transmitted as mediations, altering our visual culture and inviting new forms of participation and interpretation. They challenge the public to see familiar places through unfamiliar perspectives, disrupting passive perception and sparking critical thought. Whether this is possible and how to implement it, is the task of artists, social designers and media experts today.

Boris Groys brings another dimension to the conversation by highlighting the inherently political nature of art in public space. In his writings, particularly *Art Power*, Groys discusses how the placement of art in public transforms it from a private aesthetic experience into a collective, political act. Public spaces are often dominated by state or corporate interests, but contemporary art (can) reclaim these areas for public discourse. By interrupting the visual and ideological norms of public space, art challenges authority and invites democratic engagement. It reconfigures space not as a neutral background, but as a contested site of meaning-making.

Moreover, in the contemporary context, artists act as curators of visibility. In a world overloaded with information and images, what becomes visible — and how — is a matter of critical importance. Public art, therefore, becomes a form of resistance to the invisibility imposed by mainstream media and consumer culture. It can make marginalized voices, histories, and perspectives visible, fostering a more inclusive and dialogical public sphere where a redistribution of the future is possible.

Bolstering Flusser and Groys, we should rethink artistic practice not merely as object or spectacle, but as a medium of thought and a form of action. In public space, art engages directly with society, not through institutions or galleries, but through daily interaction with citizens. It becomes a living part of the urban fabric, capable of transforming space into place — imbued with meaning, memory, and possibility — that hopefully brings a slight positive change.

In summary, contemporary public art matters because it reclaims the visual and conceptual territory of public life. Through the lenses of Flusser and Groys, we understand it as a form of communication that contests dominant narratives, mediates new ways of seeing, and engages citizens in the ongoing negotiation of what it means to live together in shared space.

On the other hand, maybe we can learn something from the critical practices of the past and the current critical museology? Could the contemporary museum, and more specifically the Museum of Contemporary Art, play a pivotal role in reclaiming public space as a confrontational field, a new specifically designed political agora? It is especially important when dealing with contested urban projects like the infamous *Skopje 2014*. In this government initiative, avoiding any debate, they sought to reshape national identity through an aggressive overhaul of the city's architecture and monuments, often criticized for its nationalist overtones and historical revisionism. In response, some museums and independent cultural institutions emerged as critical voices, challenging the imposed narratives by promoting alternative histories, critical discourse, and public engagement. By curating counter-exhibitions, hosting debates, and collaborating with artists, these institutions became agents of resistance, turning cultural space into a platform for democratic reflection and dissent. But, unfortunately, in the case of *Skopje*, it did not change the overall look of the city - we are still forced to live in it, and more than a decade later, we are still left thinking about the effects and the approaches of confronting the state apparatus.

Mischa Kuball's project *if walls could tell* (Skopje edition) brought a poignant and meaningful intervention within the debate on public space, memory, and political agency. Through this project, he gave a metaphoric voice to walls that have witnessed, embodied, or concealed social and political narratives. In the context of public space, his work disrupts the urban visual field not through permanent structures, but through ephemeral gestures that invite reflection and dialogue. Challenging viewers to consider the civic space, as well as the ideologies and histories embedded within it, he also subverts the dominant logic of monumental propaganda, such as that seen in *Skopje 2014*, which relied heavily on neoclassical forms to assert a problematic and inconsistent national identity.

Furthermore, *if walls could tell* aligns with the notion of the political potential of art in public space. Rather than reinforcing a single, hegemonic narrative, Kuball's work opens public space to ambiguity, memory, and multiplicity. It invites citizens to engage critically with their surroundings, to question what is remembered and what is forgotten, and to see public space as a living, contested agora rather than a static backdrop. Considering all the dangers of falling into instrumentalized forms of participation when a collective effort is in question, it is probably the only plausible way for us to exemplify how contemporary art can transform the city into a space of discourse, dissent, and democratic imagination in our increasingly dangerous global situation.

Vladimir Janchevski is a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje. His interests span interdisciplinary art practices, image theory, art and politics, interventions in public space, censorship and iconoclastic acts. Since 2004, he co-organized, curated, and co-curated numerous exhibitions (*Resistant Images: John Heartfield and the Satirical Photomontage*, MoCA-Skopje 2021; *Weaving Worlds: Collections in conversation*, MG+MSUM 2025; *The East Remains Possible*, MoCA-Skopje 2025). He was a core member of the art initiative KOOPERACIJA (2012-2015), organizing events, co-curating exhibitions, moderating discussions, and writing texts for over a dozen international events in Skopje, Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Freising, and Prishtina. Since 2011, he has collaborated with the Center for Visual Studies-Skopje, and participated in international conferences, including *Iconology – Old and New* (2013, Rijeka-Budapest), *Provocation as Art* (2015, Cluj-Napoca), and *Images as Agents* (2016, Kiel). Janchevski participated in numerous group exhibitions, collaborative projects, lectures, and public discussions across Europe, and has also organized public lectures in Skopje, featuring prominent artists and theorists such as Vitaly Komar (2012) and James Elkins (2014). An active writer, he has authored numerous texts focusing on artists like Igor Toshevski, Nikola Uzunovski, OPA, Driton Selmani, Alban Muja and Artur Żmijewski. In 2019, he received the *Ladislav Barishic Award* for art criticism from AICA-Macedonia.

The 'Cloud' Culture of Clouded Modernity

Nebojša Vilić

"All that was solid melted into the 'Cloud'", to paraphrase the essential metaphor of Marx and Engels from *The Communist Manifesto*: "All that is solid melts into air".¹ Melting with modernization the previous eras (within the framework of economics and politics), that is, "solid modernity", capitalism, with its further development, managed to melt itself into itself. Melting, dissolving solid structures into airy structures ("All that is solid melts into air"), it itself became a kind of anti-structure, a kind of non-structure. The staged development of this melting, dissolving is the staged "constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society".²

From here on:

(i) Firstly, "solid" structures, through constant revolutionization, are transformed into "liquid" structures [liquid], as Zygmunt Bauman notes: solid modernity is transformed into liquid modernity. The loss of the center (as the basis of the solid structure), the so-called decentralization, has led to the establishment of loose and unstable connections, connections that are changeable and variable, short-lived, that is, nothing remains permanent, but is transformed into something ephemeral. Since such structures are impermanent, they cannot be replaced by others, because those others are also such, "subject to dissolution and, therefore, equally impermanent," Bauman concludes.³ Industrial society replaces feudal society.

(ia) Then, becoming such, impermanent, solid structures begin to evaporate, that is, to transform into "gaseous" structures [gazeux], as Yves Michaud writes, as a kind of even more unstable structure due to the even weaker connections within it. Neoliberal capital is a reflection of such a structure, both in economic and political and cultural terms. And so Michaud concludes that a double logic prevails, as far as culture is concerned: "on the one hand, the experience of contemporary art takes on a diffuse and nebulous form of aesthetic experience, but this occurs within still conventional and recognized frameworks (gallery, museum, art school, art event), so that "art is spread everywhere, and therefore it is nowhere" or "museums are [no longer] places of pilgrimage for the devoted but stages of tourist journeys".⁴

(iib) By interpreting hybridization, multiplicity and mutogenicity as categories of even more unstable structural connections, Paul Ardenne, in the spirit of the gaseous structure, refers to the view that "the contemporary work of art is the sum of accumulated and mixed styles" that do not create meanings, and hence values anymore. And therefore, he concludes, the interpretation, evaluation and historicization of the work of art can no longer be spoken of and therefore only "stutters".⁵ This shows that the solid structure has lost its last point of support or reference. Post-industrial society (a society based on services, rather than production) replaces industrial society.

(iii) All this decentralization has led not only to the loss of the center, but also to the ignorance of where it was or, if it still exists, where it is? This is what the supposed so-called "Cloud" culture points to. Cloud culture, as a metaphor, refers to the current "structure" [now in quotation marks]. In circumstances in which digitality, virtuality and artificial intelligence dominate the appropriation (albeit arbitrarily given) of the most unstable thing: data, any structure will have to be completely unstable and, hence, completely non-referential: meanings begin to have a temporary, or rather, short-term existence and character (if they exist at all) and, therefore, they are unfounded (false; fake) values. The Cloud "structure" is that of stock market speculation, of bitcoins, of "knowledge" reduced to the possibility (and only that) of informing (and nothing more than that): information (or rather, its free "purchase" (since we ourselves place information about ourselves in cyberspace)) and possession of it becomes crucial and fundamental.

A Cloud, which is somewhere-there, replaces gas with radio waves and frequencies (hotspots for wireless networks: Bluetooth, Wi-Fi, wireless local-area network (WLAN) etc.). It becomes a metaphor for a certain clouded modernity: people no longer go to libraries, but download PDF books; they no longer go to brothels, but surf "adult Web sites"; they no longer go to casinos, but log in to online gambling; they no longer go to meetings in boardrooms, but on *Zoom*, on *Facetime* or in *Metaverse* (virtual worlds in which users represented by avatars interact, usually in 3D and focused on social and economic connection); they no longer go to an atelier or workshop or to sales galleries and art fairs, but post and buy "non-fungible tokens" (NFTs) ... they no longer go to museums, but on Google and/or Google Images... Data is being commodified. The information society replaces the post-industrial society.

* * *

Therefore (1): What is the museum today? Something placed between the already clouded culture (cyberspace) above it and that of the street, below it (actual space).

Hence, if solid structures were located in temples, churches, royal and papal collections (i); museums and galleries inaugurated the work of art as a marketable commodity (commodification) (iia); gaseous works transformed themselves into impermanent hybrids (iib), then the Cloud (iii) produces and forces a "grounding": from museum fortifications (or the museum as a fortress (hard structure) in which the bourgeois conception of culture and art is preserved and secured; as a closed public space) back to the open public space, "on the street". And there, on the street, in the open air, as in the Athenian agora, things happen that are ephemeral and that are not subject to any market (i.e. ownership) logic, and hence economy. This and such resistance and struggle against commodification is reduced to the symbolic, but also structural conflict: the street stickers stuck in all possible and impossible places are its Declaration against and against the street bronze from the "Skopje 2014" project, for example.

Therefore (2): Participatory public art is or represents the resistance and struggle of the citizenry [citoyen] and the civil structured system against the bourgeoisie [middle class] and the bourgeois arrangement of the system that affirms property from its first to its last instances. Citizenship with street art, or rather with [now in quotes] "art" on the street, nullifies the proposed metaphor from this discussion as a "two-way alley", by which the artwork performed in the open public space is relocated back to the museum (to become part of the museum's collection of commodifications), and represents the metaphor of a "one-way alley": for a work that will last as long as it lasts, until

its self-destruction, decay, disappearance on a certain surface, in some alley, on some wall, garage or lamppost. Because, if the bourgeois capitalist structure subsumes everything under the concept of commodification, then the citizenry's anti-capitalist structure must act only as anti-commodification.

For no other reason than because of what arises from such structures, which is that: in what economic and ideological structure things are organized and placed, such will be the society, such will be the culture, such will be the "art".

Notes

1 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Samuel H. Beer (ed.), (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), 13.

2 *Ibid.*, 12.

3 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, (Cambridge, UK and Malden, USA: Polity Press, 2000); Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskins, *Liquid Evil*, (Cambridge, UK and Malden, USA: Polity Press, 2016); Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, (Cambridge, UK and Malden, USA: Polity Press, 2000), 11-2.

4 Yves Michaud, *Umjetnost u plinovitom stanju. Esej o trijumfu estetike*, (Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2004), 142-3.

5 Пол Арден, Да ја анализираме живата уметност, ако е тоа можно: Извештај за пелтечењето, [Paul Ardenne, *Analyser l'art vivant, s'il se peut: Un constat de balbutiement*] (Скопје: Аз-Буки, 2004), 33-47.

Nebojša Vilić, Ph.D. (1962), art historian and full professor at University "St. Cyril and Methodius" in Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia. Ongoing cultural and societal criticism project on Instagram and Youtube: "The. Out.s" Lives, thinks and rides road bike in Struga and Skopje.

Chişinău

Moldova

Center for Contemporary Art, KSA:K and PLAI Gallery Inauguration: January 31, 2025

Chişinău is the capital of the Republic of Moldova and its largest city. It developed as a significant urban centre under Russian imperial administration after 1812, acquiring neoclassical public buildings, tree-lined boulevards, and a mixed population of Moldovans, Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, and other communities. The Soviet period from 1940, interrupted by Romanian and German occupation during the Second World War, remade the city through large-scale construction of housing blocks, public institutions, and a series of monumental mosaics that are now the subject of a citizen-led documentation and preservation effort. Moldova declared independence in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The transition period brought significant economic hardship, population emigration, and the unresolved territorial situation of the Transnistria region, all of which have shaped the resources and conditions available for cultural life in the capital.

Chişinău does not have a modern and contemporary art museum, and this structural absence is a defining condition of the local art scene. The National Museum of Art of Moldova, founded in 1939 and housing over 40,000 works from medieval icons through twentieth-century Moldovan and European painting, is the principal public art institution. Since the mid-1990s, the Center for Contemporary Art KSA:K (formerly the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art) has provided the main institutional platform for contemporary, performative, and participatory practices, working alongside the PLAI Gallery and other independent initiatives. These organisations occupy an active space between the official conservative institutional framework, which is confined largely to established venues, and the broader public sphere. Questions of who can access public space, and



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under what conditions artistic interventions can engage diverse communities, are not theoretical abstractions in Chişinău but practical and political challenges that define the conditions of art-making here.

– by Vero Róza Risnovska

Panel discussion:

Accessibility of Public Spaces for Engaging in Participatory Artistic Practices

This panel discussion will explore ongoing theoretical debates concerning the role of participation in contemporary artistic practices, particularly in public spaces. Drawing on Claire Bishop's definition of participation, where people themselves become the central artistic medium and material, the discussion will delve into the theoretical foundations and further critical reflections on this approach. Her arguments, informed by the theory of radical democracy, advocate for resistant and antagonistic art practices that challenge co-dependency and conviviality. In contrast, Shannon Jackson's *Social Work* offers a critique of the oppositions and tensions traditionally associated with participatory art. Jackson advocates for a more "eclectic," nuanced, and open-ended approach to social engagement and the aesthetic integrity of participatory art. Unlike Bishop, Jackson does not prioritize creative agency, a focus that could undermine the complexity of the social and institutional contexts in which participatory art is embedded.

Following this seminal debate on participatory art, recent theories have opened up new avenues for interpretation, placing strong emphasis on community engagement, collaborative practices, and the co-creation of works by artists and publics. As suggested by Michele Bonazzi, these processes empower engaged participants, transforming them from passive consumers into active co-authors of collective experiences. Another perspective, as articulated by Thomas Munley, emphasizes the importance of the concept of care in participatory art, advocating for an approach that fosters community development.

An additional relevant issue to be highlighted is the ethical dimension of participatory art, which often engages with the "sore points" of society. From this, a key question arises: can aesthetics be interconnected with the concept of participation? Is there such a thing as a participatory aesthetic? The lingering question remains: does participatory art hold transformative potential? If so, what conditions must be met for this potential to be realized?

In addition to these theoretical frameworks and questions, we will analyze another position: that of the artist as a catalyst and mediator, who sets up a "stage" for open-ended participation. This approach envisions a kind of *tabula rasa* an unfiltered space, free from guiding principles or imposed limits allowing participants to express themselves on blank walls in public spaces. While these walls may symbolically reference the institutional framework of the museum, they are perceived by the public as empty signifiers, not necessarily bound to institutional contexts or critique. The question that emerges here is whether such participatory art practices in public spaces are merely temporary and ephemeral channels for expression or whether they reflect a truly uncontrolled, decolonized public space.

– by Zoran Erić







Panel discussion "Accessibility of Public Spaces for Engaging in Participatory Artistic Practices", February 2, 2025, with Lilia Dragneva, Ştefan Rusu, Ovidiu Ţichindeleanu, Vladimir Us, Lilia Nenescu, and Zoran Erić



Emergent Institutionalization and Access to Public Space: Participatory Artistic Practices in Post-Socialist Chişinău

Lilia Dragneva

Public Space Between Use and Access

Access to public space in Chişinău must be understood in terms of an unstable institutional ecology, shaped by the socialist legacy, the post-Soviet transition, and the absence of a coherent modern cultural infrastructure. In this configuration, public space is not merely a neutral backdrop but an urban resource subject to control, negotiation, and conflict. Participatory artistic practices developed in this context become tools for intervention, symbolic reclaiming, and the constitution of an alternative form of institutionalization. Chişinău lacks a public institution specialized in representing contemporary art, such as a dedicated museum. This void generates an artistic scene in a constant state of institutional improvisation, supported by independent initiatives, informal networks, and cross-sectoral partnerships.

The accessibility of public space in Chişinău should be seen as part of a broader process of socio-spatial reconfiguration following the collapse of the socialist system. The city has undergone a series of fragmented and uncoordinated transformations, in which inherited common spaces were either privatized or abandoned, and the idea of public space as a site of collective expression and civic engagement has been gradually eroded. In the absence of a stable institutional framework to support contemporary art and its participatory practices, independent initiatives have become the main driving force behind the reinvention of urban cultural infrastructure.

Emergent Institutional Practices: The Case of KSA:K

The NGO Center for Contemporary Art KSA:K, founded in Chişinău in 2000, operates as an independent organization dedicated to contemporary art, visual education, and artistic research. Its activity aims to develop an alternative framework for the production and dissemination of art, outside official institutions and traditional exhibition logics. In the absence of a stable infrastructure, KSA:K has initiated a series of projects aimed at activating peripheral or overlooked urban spaces, revalorizing them through collaborative artistic interventions.

A key component of its strategy is its focus on young audiences: students from high schools and art schools, undergraduate and graduate visual arts students, as well as emerging artists. This strategic choice not only addresses educational needs but also aims to build critical communities capable of actively contributing to co-creation processes and redefining the relationship between art and urban space.

Kunsträume – An Artistic Network of Alternative Spaces

A significant moment in the development of Chişinău's independent artistic infrastructure was the Kunsträume project (2014–2016), carried out by the Goethe-Institut Bucharest in partnership with KSA:K and Goethe-Zentrum Chişinău, with support from the German Federal Foreign Office. The project aimed to activate a network of alternative art spaces in Moldova and Ukraine, supporting emerging cultural production in contexts affected by political instability and chronic underfunding.

Three emblematic spaces were developed within this project: Bunker Gallery, located in the basement of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Decorative Arts, and Design at AMTAP (Academy of Music, Theatre and Fine Arts), obtained through a public-civic partnership; Podzemka Gallery, housed in a basement space of the “Alexei Sciusev” School of Fine Arts, where the link with the educational process is direct and ongoing; and the Warmepol Zone, an intermedia project combining urban gardening and artistic intervention, located on the rooftop of the “Al. Plămădeală” College of Fine Arts, which introduces an ecological and community-oriented dimension to the discourse on public space.

These spaces function outside conventional exhibition frameworks, activated through pedagogical, artistic, and curatorial practices based on collaboration, openness, and continuous negotiation.

Hybrid Partnerships: Between Civicism and Cultural Economy

Alongside the public-civic partnership models developed through Kunsträume, Chişinău's art scene increasingly explores collaborations with the private sector. One such example is KSA:K's partnership with Galeria Plai, a commercial contemporary art space that supports emerging artistic initiatives and provides a visibility platform for young artists.

This civic-private collaboration reflects a logic of functional co-dependence in a context where public resources are limited and traditional institutional structures are ineffective or absent.

Such hybrid alliances do not erase ideological or economic differences but propose a framework of negotiated coexistence, in which access to public space is reconsidered through the lens of artistic autonomy, circulation, and infrastructural sustainability.

Public Space as an Open Institution

The case study presented here shows that, in post-socialist Chişinău, access to public space for participatory artistic practices is inseparable from processes of alternative institutionalization. Initiatives such as those developed by KSA:K do not merely occupy physical spaces but propose models of emergent institutionalization based on critical pedagogy, cross-sector partnerships, and community involvement.

Accessibility, in this framework, is not a pre-existing condition but the outcome of collective claims, social organization, and artistic co-creation. Public space thus becomes not only the stage for aesthetic interventions but an open, permeable, and politicizable institution – a living framework in which the forms of a shared cultural future are negotiated.

Emergent artistic infrastructure in Chişinău offers not only models for occupying and re-signifying urban space but also the possibility of imagining a different institutional future – one that is flexible, decentralized, and participatory, in which art means coexistence rather than isolation, and public space represents possibility rather than control.

Lilia Dragneva (b. 1975, Chişinău) is a visual artist, curator, and researcher active in the contemporary art scene of the Republic of Moldova. Since 2000, she has led the Center for Contemporary Art [ksa:k] and serves as curator of the BUNKER Gallery, where she develops an informal school for curatorial practices. Her artistic path began with experimental sound and image works influenced by avant-garde and Dada sources, later shifting toward critical discourse and the construction of new, symbolic narratives rooted in Moldovan society. She has participated in exhibitions such as *After the Wall* (Moderna Museet, Stockholm), *Body and the East* (Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana), and *Senses Test Station* (Moscow). As curator, she has worked with artists from Moldova, Ukraine, and the broader diaspora, initiating projects like *WÄRME-POL*, the *Evening School of Academic Drawing*, and the *CarbonART* creative camp. She also produced the national TV program *ALTE ARTE* (2004–2007) with support from Kulturstiftung des Bundes. She teaches art history, management, and curatorial practices at AMTAP and the Fine Arts College “Al. Plămădeală”. Between 2012–2017 she was a researcher at the Institute of Cultural Heritage and is currently finalizing a PhD on contemporary art in Moldova.

Connecting the Dots

Vladimir Us

Open public spaces constitute the democratic infrastructure of any society, while accessible public spaces for independent cultural initiatives (and citizens initiatives in general) in post-socialist cities could represent an important indicator characterising the society's overall democratic nature.

Although seemingly accessible today, it was not always the case, especially if we look back to when public space in Moldova was governed by authoritarian regimes. Nowadays, it still lacks proper regulation that could prevent any misuse and offer a protective status, and which would encourage different civic initiatives to make better use of it for cultural and educational purposes alike. Considering this, the public spaces in Chişinău are still fragile as constructions, remaining vulnerable to economic exploitation and overcommercialization due to private interests prevailing over public ones, as well as being exposed to various forms of control from public authorities that could impose restrictions over them at any given moment.

Oberliht Association has been trying to address some of these challenges over the years by not only initiating pivotal events, but also through long term programs organized in collaboration with artists, architects, sociologists, historians, researchers and activists, assembling in time a community of cultural workers and other professionals interested in urban transformations. Together, and by making use of public spaces, we have developed certain methodologies in order to open wider public infrastructure to citizens' initiatives.



Public Facades, Maria Dragan neighborhood in Ciocana district, Chişinău (July 22-29, 2019).
Percussion workshop facilitated by Ana Popa and Thomas Wood



Public Facades, Maria Dragan neighborhood in Ciocana district, Chişinău (July 22-29, 2019).
Swing by Clara Abdullah

From the outset, as a group of art students at the Painting Faculty, we felt the need to self-organize in order to get access to exhibition spaces that belonged to public cultural institutions and to overcome the feeling of isolation that we faced in the field of the arts and culture in Moldova. Once graduated from the Art Academy, we shifted our focus from the usual studio practice towards engaging with the topic of public space, by making use of our classical art training in an experimental way. We proceeded by focusing our attention on the external urban and social conditions and by documenting via the means of photography, the ongoing urban transformations and gradually rebuilding our relationship with the city and its ever changing environment through a series of ephemeral interventions in the public spaces of Chişinău and its suburbs.

Establishing the *Flat Space* as a cultural platform for public participation followed shortly after, creating better conditions for further development of the experimental art practice related to the topic of urban transformations. Reclaiming a public pedestrian square from illegally parked cars through arts and culture made us engage more actively in the process of rethinking the urban policies themselves. Furthermore, the establishment of an online mailing list and a paper based magazine helped us make our activities visible both on the local and international levels, leading to new collaborations with partners from former socialist republics and central and western European cities.

These efforts were complemented by the establishment of the *Public Space Library* - an important resource for self-education in relation to public space. Conceived initially as a virtual space, with a preliminary selection of a hundred titles, it expanded as a physical space currently containing over 400 titles about art in public space, architecture and urbanism, community development, urban economy and urban theory in general, meant to extend the discourse on various processes that shape the city and its public spaces both locally and elsewhere. The activities carried out in its frame adopted the format of reading groups, mapping workshops, multiple series of talks and conferences on the topic of the city and culture, as well as a distributed newsletter relating cultural and activist practices every second or third month.



Public Facades, Maria Dragan neighborhood in Ciocana district, Chişinău (July 22-29, 2019). Analogue photography workshop. Photos by Anna Bantiuc

The theoretical approach combined with the field trips, site-specific art interventions and community engaged activities led to the creation of a new vision for a network of interconnected public spaces with squares and parks, pedestrian areas, spaces for culture, sport and leisure activities. These were created and projected over the historical part of Chişinău as an alternative topology not dominated by state ideology or excessive commercialization.

A similar participatory approach was used during our work within residential areas, aiming to reach the inhabitants from specific neighborhoods and involve them in the process of rearranging the inner courtyard's open spaces. Between 2014-2017, a program of cultural events framed as *Public Space Days* was organized in different areas of the city, connecting both local and international initiatives dealing with the topic of public space. It was complemented by the *Public Facades* - a project for mapping residential neighborhoods built after the Second World War and their consequent activation through community building and cultural animation methods in partnership with local public institutions. The project developed across two different residential areas of Chişinău; in Teilor street, situated in Botanica district - a more established neighborhood designed and built in the 1960s, and in Maria Drăgan, street situated in Ciocana Veche (Old Ciocana) - one of the outlying districts and home to many economically marginalized inhabitants formerly employed in the now defunct industrial area of the city.

Many residential neighborhoods were significantly affected during the radical economic transformations of the 1990s and early 2000s, when numerous cultural spaces and social infrastructures were either privatized or demolished. The problems worsened when the industry stopped functioning and many of the inhabitants lost their jobs.

Many of our colleagues (artists, architects, researchers etc.) from Minsk, Kiev, Tbilisi and Yerevan, and also from Central and Western European cities like Bucharest, Iaşi, Budapest, Kosice, Brno, Warsaw, Madrid or Barcelona with whom we connected during the research visits organized in the past, were using similar approaches to the ones described above. In fact, some of their approaches were tested in Chişinău during the joint collaborations, allowing us to share the accumulated experiences with each other and led to the creation of a specific working methodology within the public domain that could possibly be replicated in other contexts.

One of the important remaining questions to be answered is the following: How do we maintain and preserve, and/or develop the already established platforms, so that they are regularly used by the local communities and are integrated within the plans of the public authorities in order to be supported on a more regular basis for long-term sustainability?

It seems that establishing programs like *Public Space Days* or *Alternative Cultural Spaces* that could connect different initiatives and provide them with a frame for interacting with each other, alongside formats like *Open Studios* or other formats taking place regularly at Casa Zemstvei (an alternative cultural center that aims to provide artistic autonomy to its users), is not enough. This is evident, considering that the project logic that currently dominates our activities is a rather unsustainable one, and perpetuates the precarious conditions in which we all currently work.

The project logic merely provides a temporary possibility to activate, where a more permanent solution is needed. This, in turn, also affects the question of audience development, as it seems that only publicly funded institutions with regular support have the privilege to work and develop audiences on regular bases. Compared to these institutions, independent cultural initiatives can possibly form temporary communities by finding ways to transform a passer-by into an active member of the audience. This could happen by inviting them to join an ongoing activity, first by attracting their attention, making them stop and wonder, and then start questioning the situation that is developing in front of their eyes before they engage in a dialogic process that could potentially lead to a meaningful exchange within the participatory process. Until we find ways to establish our own structures and popularize our experimental art practice, we will continue acting from the margins of a cultural system that was traditionally dominated by state ideology and is gradually instrumentalized by private interests represented through creative industries.

Vladimir Us (b. 1980) is an artist and curator based in Chişinău, Moldova, and a founding member of the *Oberliht* Young Artists Association (<https://oberliht.org/>). He studied art, curating, cultural management, and cultural policy in Chişinău, Grenoble, and Belgrade. Since 2000, under the umbrella of the *Oberliht* Association, he has initiated several cultural platforms and publications in collaboration with artists and cultural workers from across the region, including the [oberlist] mailing list, Postbox Magazine – literature, art & attitude, Kiosk AIR (an artist-in-residence program), Zpace (an independent arts and culture space in Moldova), among other projects.

Through his curatorial work, he aims to increase access to socially engaged art in Moldova, stressing the need for spatial justice and for an inclusive urban environment in Chişinău and other post-Soviet cities. His cultural activism focuses on the development of public spaces as the city's democratic infrastructure, as well as on improving higher education art curricula through the introduction of various artistic practices and theoretical modules, and on building a resilient independent cultural scene in Moldova and the wider region. As a long-distance cyclist, he has been passionate about bike culture, actively supporting the growth of the cycling movement as a form of alternative (non-motorized) transportation both within urban areas and across the country.

Socialist Architecture as a Common Value and Public Space as a Heritage

Ștefan Rusu

The main resource of my interventions in the urban context is socialist architecture and via this I'm questioning the role and significance it plays in contemporary society. In reality, there is often a lack of social awareness of the historic significance and value of socialist architecture as heritage. In spite of the temporal distance of the epoch, the strong semantic layer of the constructivist, socialist-realist and modernist architecture causes that it is generally associated with the repressive communist era. The legitimacy of preserving or even perceiving these buildings as valuable is still questioned in post-soviet societies.

The relation to the cultural heritage of the immediate past in the case of modernist aesthetics is directly connected with the present and future time, given the vitality and presence of recent urban developments, be it in Chișinău, in Tbilisi or in Baku. The preservation of modernist heritage in the current socio-economic situation and urban context is problematic, in some cases even dramatic. In response, we as cultural workers have to deal with it and transform it for the benefit of the people that inhabit mass housing buildings.

My practice is transdisciplinary, it is based on research and collaboration with collectives and citizens actively engaged in defending public spaces, and in the protection of architectural heritage. Most of the urban interventions developed between the years 2009-2024 spread across various European and Asian cities, and these have been conceived in collaboration with artistic initiatives and civil society organizations involved in situations of conflict between citizens and authorities, or in situations where the local administrations appropriated vacant spaces and territories, abandoned buildings, parks or green areas in collaboration with real estate developers, thus acting against public interest.

One of the longest-lasting projects I ever produced was Apartmentul Deschis/Flat Space, developed in collaboration with Oberliht Young Artist Association and installed in Chișinău (2009). After it was installed, the space became a venue for exhibitions, conferences, concerts, screenings of video art and films, poetry readings, meetings with foreign students, second-hand and barter markets, demonstrations, a signature collection point, a meeting point for sightseers, writing workshops, and cooking courses followed by dinners, barbecues or mămăligă (traditional cornbread) tastings. The interventions I have done in urban space are performative structures that usually feature elements of residential architecture, inspired by the concrete experiences of living in each urban environment, and look for new meaning within the apartment, the street, the neighborhood and the city in different political and economic contexts.

Another example of such interventions is Block89, installed in Georgia in the courtyard of a housing block as part of the Tbilisi Architecture Biennale (2018). On a practical level, the logic of this project was the reuse of existing prefabricated concrete elements, in this case a replica of the entrance into a socialist flat building that explores the facets of a soviet modernist house from Gldani district, Tbilisi (1970's). The inter-

vention of Block89 was motivated by several factors: a lack of maintenance of prefabricated panel buildings, a lack of conservation policy of built heritage from soviet era and consequently, a growing negative perception towards standard mass housing. What I intend is to reverse this common attitude towards the phenomena of socialist architecture and maintain positive and constructive views on this complex issue, by looking for appropriate technical solutions to preserve it as heritage.

Once an artist decides to do an intervention in public space, there is an assumed responsibility for the gesture, and the way it will be received by the residents of specific neighborhoods and the public. I recall a project by Nada Prlja who installed her “peace wall”, that resulted in blocked traffic in Kreuzberg during Berlin Biennale 7th edition (curated by Joanna Warsza and Artur Żmijewski).

Her intervention was not a reference to the Berlin Wall, but to the social segregation present in this area today. Such a project provoked a response from the residents and the public from the start, and this is what happened instantly. The very location of Prlja’s wall represented a space where certain communities lost their ability to influence the decision-making process, which made concrete the necessity to fight for their rights. With this civic metaphor, the installations call for shared spaces that are free of political control and economic barriers, where citizens can learn about and openly debate issues of concern.

Nada Prlja “peace wall” was a particular case, but I would like to expand on the aspects of my practice where there are of course successful and failed experiences.



Block 89, site-specific installation. Produced in the frame of Tbilisi Architecture Biennale – “Buildings are not enough”, 2018. Image courtesy of Ștefan Rusu

Specifically aimed at young people, Apartmentul Deschis/Flat Space sought to manifest a meeting place, a space that would generate activities and promote citizen activity from the ground up. It was a way of challenging the powers-that-be by calling for collective use of a derelict space and placing it at the service of art and culture. Perhaps this is the reason that it is still active (2009-2025) and continues to serve the initial purpose. The reactions from the public and passersby range from appreciation to rejection, manifested by cultural operators who rent spaces in the Municipal Department of Culture, next to which the Apartmentul Deschis/Flat Space is installed. They perceive the square as a commodity, as a parking lot for their cars, and the installation with its angular shape causes only inconvenience. Furthermore, some representatives of the cultural elite nicknamed it “Balcony”, ridiculing its position in and importance for the art community.

One of the failed examples happened in Baku during the “Urban Olum” Public Art Festival organized by the Pillə, an urbanist initiative from Azerbaijan. My installation “Communal Loggia”, freshly installed in the Bayil district, did not survive and was destroyed overnight by locals. Was it feedback from the locals or it was an accident? The organizers of the urban festival could not discover what happened, and we have to learn from such cases too.

Consequently, those urban interventions are not just part of an art collection inserted in public space as pieces of urban decor, but an ongoing effort to look for answers and solutions for communities in a bind and for spaces adrift - be it the community of young artists from Chişinău who lack work spaces and exhibition venues, or the inhabitants of Bayil district from Baku, caught in the spiral of gentrification and neglected by the authorities.

In summary, some of the models that I find relevant and important when approaching issues of public space; collective work as a principle in art production, commonality (a former principle of collective ownership) needs to be resurrected, cross disciplinarity of art production – especially when working in public space with expansive complexities. Finally, connecting public and private interest in protecting socialist architecture as a common value and public space as heritage.

Ştefan Rusu (b. 1964 in Kâietu, Moldova) is an artist, curator, and urban researcher working between Chişinău, Republic of Moldova and Bucharest, Romania, and is currently based in Apia, Samoa Islands/South Pacific. His artistic and curatorial agenda follows a transdisciplinary approach, dealing with exhibition design, publishing, film production, educational platforms and cultural activism, urban research and the protection of tangible and intangible heritage. Since the 1990's, his practice is geared towards the social and political changes in Eastern European societies after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. From 2000 onward, he is involved in the evolution of KSAK Center, Chişinău, and later in 2005-2006 he completed the Curatorial Training Program at De Appel, Amsterdam. Towards the end of 2012, he moved to Tajikistan, where he collaborated with the Dushanbe Art Ground center. After relocating to Kyrgyzstan in 2016, he initiated a research platform “Insular Modernities” – that explores urban contexts and architectural heritage, mapping the status of public space and the actors of urban activism in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. www.stefanrusu.net

Access to Gardening in Public Spaces in Chişinău

Lilia Nenescu

In Chişinău, 80% of people live in blocks of flats, and only a few percent of those living in private houses have their own garden. At the same time, public spaces with gardening potential are constantly shrinking. Agricultural land in the city's urban and non-urban areas have been reduced since the Soviet period, when it was used for the construction of new neighborhoods. Until now, the lack of a general urban development plan, coupled with huge commercial pressure, has contributed, through various public land grabbing schemes, to the reduction of agricultural land used for food production, as well as for research and education in the agri-food sector.

At the moment, Chişinău does not have any legal mechanism to provide access to land for people who want to garden. However, there was a municipal legal framework in Chişinău that regulated gardening and guaranteed access to land for gardening from 1984-2005. In the absence of a municipal legal mechanism and a vision to meet this need, on the one hand we are witnessing an increase in informal gardening, and on the other hand, a reduction in land with gardening potential, which is being taken out of the agricultural and educational circuit and turned into land for residential purposes and commercial construction.



Comunitati Active pentru Democratie Participativa, workshop on urban food forest near the community pavilion in Calea Orheiului park, May 2025. Photo: Lilia Nenescu.

The only way for those who want to garden in public spaces in the city is to participate in the public auctions organized by the municipality and to propose a price for these plots of public spaces that would be higher than the bids offered by real estate companies with commercial interests, or, to start doing guerrilla gardening.

Although most people do not have access to spaces for gardening, many people still garden. Some garden on their balconies, others «adopt» certain plots of land and turn them into small gardens for home or family consumption. Thus, small gardens are set up in the courtyards of flat blocks, while larger gardens are the ones that are still kept and maintained by gardeners in the former urban gardens set up between 1984-2005 in public spaces. These include La Izvor Park (Buiucani), Talpa Gâştei Park (Poşta Veche), and in the space between Nicolae Milescu Spătaru and Ciocana Veche streets. Informal urban gardening practices speak convincingly of the need for residents to garden and grow their own food despite the lack of legal framework.

Understanding urban gardening as a grassroots-led claim over public land and spontaneous appropriation of neglected/threatened spaces, and through direct action and DIY practices, we have used urban gardening to protest against the privatization of three public green spaces in Chişinău, all of which are contested spaces at risk of privatization. These are; the Guerilla Garden in Central Park, around the former Guguţă Caffè which has been a focal point of activist resistance since 2014, the Community Garden in the Circus Square and Orchard and the Raised Bed Garden in Poşta Veche district.



Comunitati Active pentru Democratie Participativa, workshop on urban food forest near the community pavilion in Calea Orheiului park, May 2025. Photo: Lilia Nenescu.



Lilia Nenescu, Guerrilla gardening in the central park, in the pocket garden of the former Guguta Cafe, July 2019.
Photo: Vitalie Sprânceană.

In our practice, we use guerrilla gardening in the city not only as a tool to reclaim the right to the city but also as a tool to reclaim the right to the future. The urban garden opens up space for social interactions and discussions but also challenges our perceptions of how the city should look and what functions it should serve. It therefore provides the necessary ground to cultivate alternative visions of the world as a means to reimagine our cities. I noticed how different the attitudes of people towards gardening in the city are when I talk to them in the material space of the urban gardens versus the same discussions in environments such as conference rooms. In the gardens, nobody says that the gardens belong in the village, that the city is too polluted, and nobody asks; do you want to bring the corn field to the middle of the city? In the garden, people ask what variety of tomatoes I planted, they share their worries about the drought and I share tomato seeds.

Lilia Nenescu is a researcher and artist with a distinct focus on the interplay between urban environments and the future of cities. With academic credentials in anthropology and labor law, Lilia bridges academia and activism through her work in urban gardening and placemaking. Her initiatives in Chişinău serve as poignant examples of grassroots resistance against the privatization of public spaces. Through direct action and community engagement, initiatives like the Guerilla Garden in Central Park and the Community Garden in Scuarul Circului underscore her commitment to transforming urban landscapes. Lilia's endeavors extend beyond gardening; she explores sustainable urban futures in her children's book, «Alexandra in the Chişinău City of 2050,» and she co-wrote a thought-provoking animation scenario, «Let's Change the City, Not the Climate: Chişinău in 2050.» Her project «eat borders» further exemplifies her innovative approach to blending art with ecological activism, challenging conventional boundaries to promote radical transformation. Meanwhile, the installation «WASTELAND: a piece of idle land?» questions the relationship between urban development and nature. Throughout her career, Lilia has authored significant research on urban gardening and its potential to inspire solidarity and sustainable living, advocating for policies that facilitate access to public land.

Issues Raised Anonymously by the Participants of the Forum *A New Center for Contemporary Arts – What Is It Good For?*

Ovidiu Țichindeleanu

After decades of giving rise to ruins in the process of post-socialist deindustrialization, the city of Chișinău witnessed, in the summer of 2024, the opening of a few independent organisations, alongside news of the imminent closure of others, and the surprise announcement of ministerial plans for the future opening of a new major public institution: a museum of contemporary art. More than 40 artists and cultural workers who gathered at the September forum had the opportunity to write down anonymously their take on the needs and situation of the local scene, claiming the right to the public institution as a natural part of access to public space.

Here are some of the points raised on index cards distributed in the public and collected at the end of the forum:

- 1) The general state of precariousness of cultural workers and artists. Some mentioned the feeling of being abandoned in the past decade by the authorities.
- 2) The urgent need for workspaces (artist studios, rehearsal spaces, show spaces).
- 3) The urgent need for change in the general situation of cultural workers and in the management of the cultural sector.
- 4) The need for international events organized locally.
- 5) The need for a public institution with multiple functions: for exhibition as well as for education, production, and residences.
- 6) The desire not only for a generic common space but for a space that brings together compatible practices of the people and groups who become part of this new public institution.
- 7) Requests for a common space for visual artists and urban activists.
- 8) The participation of the artists and cultural workers in both the planning and management of the new cultural institution.
- 9) The public institution as an exit from the situation of working from project to project.
- 10) The role of public institutions to defend the autonomy of the arts from the creative industries of the private market.

As of June 2025, there is no news about any further plans for the museum.

Context

On March 29, 2024, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Moldova made a special announcement that took the local scene of Moldovan artists and cultural works by surprise. The minister, standing alone in an abandoned industrial hall, published a video of a press conference without the press, announcing the Ministry's plans for the creation of a Center for Contemporary Arts and Culture. The Center was to be instituted in the now unused and degraded building of the former industrial typography "Universul", in a space of "over 14000 sq.m". "There will be studios of creation for artists, art galleries... We want to re-animate the cultural life of the historical center of the capital and to honor our promises towards the independent artists and the NGOs from the cultural sector, the creative community and the art consumers".¹

The cultural project was to be financed with money obtained from selling the land of the former Republican Stadium, situated in the center of the Moldovan capital, for the construction of a new base of the US Embassy.² The minister proudly declared that the project of the new US embassy would involve "at least 250 million USD", while the Universal project would get 10-15 million USD.

The independent scene of Moldovan artists and cultural workers from Chişinău had previously self-organized into a Consultative Forum in November 2023. The Consultative Forum convened regularly in order to keep each other informed, to discuss and iron out disagreeable differences, and to react to events concerning the common interests of cultural workers. Following the press conference of the Ministry of Culture, the Consultative Forum held a meeting and published a note on their position.³ In the statement, the writers welcomed the official recognition, for the first time, of the need for spaces for local contemporary artists and cultural workers, but pleaded that the Ministry find alternative financial sourcing, as well as developing a model of governance of the Center that would include and integrate the artists and cultural workers. The statement articulated the clear refusal of the local artists to be involved in a process of "art washing" and cultural extractivism, and asked the Ministry to open a process of consultation with the purported beneficiaries of the Center themselves, in order to conceive the new institution based on the real needs of the cultural sector. After an initial lack of response, the Ministry of Culture announced a consultative process over a few days (July 31 – August 3), with the involvement of the Danish Cultural Institute. In reaction, the Consultative Forum reiterated the common position of the independent sector, asking the Ministry to confirm its commitment both in terms of vision and through financial support.

On September 15, 2024, at the "neutral venue" of the National Art Museum in Chişinău, the forum "A New Center for Contemporary Arts - What is it Good For?" was organized, using the resources of the exhibition "Images of the Good Life in the East," which took place in three different art spaces the previous day. The forum brought potential international allies with experience in the creation and management of a center for contemporary arts or of a major artistic event in the cultural life of a city, such as a biennial. The presentations focused on the international and local context of the creation of such institutions, on the conditions of sustainability, the relevance of a biennial or museum, and the challenges of separating the social and cultural value of arts from the economical dimension. During the forum, the local participants were invited to write down their opinions about the resident needs and dreams for such an institution anonymously.

As of September 2025, there are no rehabilitation works that have started at the typography Universal, and the US Embassy has not started construction works at its new base in Chişinău. However, the Moldovan Ministry of Culture has invited a group of European experts in cultural management. A number of cultural organizations are threatened with eviction from their current spaces, with no clear alternatives in sight. The Consultative Forum of the Independent Scene of Moldova has convened another meeting, asking again to be part of the process.

Notes

- 1 The Ministry of Culture of the Government of the Republic of Moldova, “Chişinăul va avea un centru de cultură și artă contemporană ‘Universul’”, 29.03.2024. Online: <https://mc.gov.md/ro/content/chisinaul-va-avea-un-centru-de-cultura-si-arta-contemporana-universul>.
 - 2 <https://agora.md/2024/04/09/centru-de-cultura-din-vanzarea-terenului-stadionului-republican-ong-patrimoniul-este-supus-unei-presiuni>
 - 3 <https://cscirm.wordpress.com/2024/04/08/nota-de-pozitie/>
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Ovidiu Țichindeleanu (b.1976) is a Romanian philosopher, culture theorist, translator and educator, and writes and teaches on critical social theory, the history and philosophy of the senses, decolonial and intercultural thought, artistic practices in Eastern Europe, and the cultural histories of socialism and postsocialism. Țichindeleanu is a member of the Editorial Board of *L'Internationale Online* (<https://internationaleonline.org/>); of the Transnational Board of *European Alternatives* (<https://euroalter.com/transnational-board>, 2023-present); of the Romanian artist-run cooperative *The Experimental Research Station for Art and Life*; and of the Moldovan association *The Center for Contemporary Arts Chişinău* (KSA:K).

Ljubljana

Slovenia

MGML—Galerija Vžigalica / Match Gallery Inauguration: April 15, 2025

Ljubljana is the capital of Slovenia and has been the administrative, economic, and cultural centre of the Slovenian-speaking territory since the early modern period. The city developed under Habsburg rule as a provincial capital with Baroque and later neoclassical architecture, a university, and a network of cultural and scientific societies. In the early twentieth century the architect Jože Plečnik undertook a decades-long programme of urban redesign that gave the city much of its current appearance, including the Triple Bridge, the covered market along the Ljubljanica River, the National and University Library, and the design of public spaces and smaller architectural interventions throughout the old town. This body of work has been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Slovenia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 and joined the European Union and Eurozone in 2004 and 2007 respectively, achieving relatively rapid economic integration and political stabilisation compared to other post-Yugoslav states.

Ljubljana has a well-developed network of cultural institutions for a city of its size. The National Gallery of Slovenia holds the country's principal collection of painting from the medieval period through the early twentieth century, including the Slovenian Impressionists. The Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (MSUM), opened in 2011 in a converted military barracks complex that also houses the autonomous cultural zone of Metelkova Mesto, represents the leading edge of the city's engagement with international contemporary art. The Museum and Galleries of Ljubljana (MGML), which manages the Gallery Vžigalica where this project is hosted, operates as a network of city-run spaces with a programme oriented toward contemporary social questions. Ljubljana also has a notable history of avant-



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garde and politically engaged artistic practice, from the Neue Slowenische Kunst movement of the 1980s onward, which gives the theoretical debates around participation and public art that this project engages a particular local grounding.

— by Vero Róza Risnovska

Panel discussion:

The Politics and Ethics of Participation

This panel discussion will explore ongoing theoretical debates concerning the role of participation in contemporary artistic practices, particularly in public spaces. Drawing on Claire Bishop's definition of participation, where people themselves become the central artistic medium and material, the discussion will delve into the theoretical foundations and further critical reflections on this approach. Her arguments, informed by the theory of radical democracy, advocate for resistant and antagonistic art practices that challenge co-dependency and conviviality. In contrast, Shannon Jackson's *Social Work* offers a critique of the oppositions and tensions traditionally associated with participatory art. Jackson advocates for a more "eclectic," nuanced, and open-ended approach to social engagement and the aesthetic integrity of participatory art. Unlike Bishop, Jackson does not prioritize creative agency, a focus that could undermine the complexity of the social and institutional contexts in which participatory art is embedded.

Following this seminal debate on participatory art, recent theories have opened up new avenues for interpretation, placing strong emphasis on community engagement, collaborative practices, and the co-creation of works by artists and publics. As suggested by Michele Bonazzi, these processes empower engaged participants, transforming them from passive consumers into active co-authors of collective experiences. Another perspective, as articulated by Thomas Munley, emphasizes the importance of the concept of care in participatory art, advocating for an approach that fosters community development.

An additional relevant issue to be highlighted is the ethical dimension of participatory art, which often engages with the "sore points" of society. From this, a key question arises: can aesthetics be interconnected with the concept of participation? Is there such a thing as a

participatory aesthetic? The lingering question remains: does participatory art hold transformative potential? If so, what conditions must be met for this potential to be realized?

In addition to these theoretical frameworks and questions, we will analyze another position: that of the artist as a catalyst and mediator, who sets up a "stage" for open-ended participation. This approach envisions a kind of *tabula rasa* an unfiltered space, free from guiding principles or imposed limits allowing participants to express themselves on blank walls in public spaces. While these walls may symbolically reference the institutional framework of the museum, they are perceived by the public as empty signifiers, not necessarily bound to institutional contexts or critique. The question that emerges here is whether such participatory art practices in public spaces are merely temporary and ephemeral channels for expression or whether they reflect a truly uncontrolled, decolonized public space.

– by Zoran Erić







Panel discussion "The Politics and Ethics of Participation", April 15, 2025, with Eda Čufer, Mojca Puncer, Apolonija Šušteršič, and Zoran Erić



Participating Demonstrating

Apolonija Šušteršič

Participation has been a topic of research and practice in the arts, architecture, and design for many years. Constellated across various academic fields, it has been regarded as a way to empower people and develop new methods that promote a bottom-up approach to decision-making on various publicly relevant issues. Participation platforms manifest via different forms and formats, and can be understood as a tool to demonstrate direct democratic processes.

However, we also notice that participation became widely utilised, and even abused, not only in art practice but also in the broader interdisciplinary field of spatial practice, particularly in relation to urban issues. It became a legitimation for performing democracy, especially for official urban development projects.

Upon examining the results of implementing these strategies, we have successfully incorporated some of them into our everyday lives, particularly in relation to citizens' decision-making. Still, we certainly did not practice them extensively. On the contrary, in cases where finances dictate the outcomes, decisions are made quickly without waiting for lengthy processes of discussions and negotiations with citizens. It is a fundamental law of neoliberal capitalism to accelerate the flow of money, turning it around quickly to produce as much profit as possible. Furthermore, it appears that democracies around the world are being eroded as the power of monetisation continues to expand.

Is it not interesting that at the point when we started introducing citizens' participation into state legislation, the process stalled as pandemic regulation began to work in the opposite direction? Suddenly, it was no longer allowed to gather as a group, and it was also no longer permitted to see or talk to each other in person. We all had to isolate ourselves, or we would be breaking the new "emergency law". Coming together to create communities that would impact or even undermine hierarchical power structures was out of the question. Still, every one of us has, at some point, become disobedient, realising that extreme forms of individualism are damaging. The urgency to provide an immediate and concrete response to the crisis has given rise to a sudden increase in mutual aid initiatives. Communities have proven to be resilient, able to come together and address basic needs and shared resources have provided first aid to many.

We finally understood as a society that through mutual solidarity, taking care of ourselves and each other, joining forces to protect the conditions of our immediate living environment, and un-learning the bad habits of extensive consumerism, we could change our behaviour and therefore, change our society and our relation to the world. However, following the pandemic, Europe faced another crisis with the war in Ukraine. This war divided the world in many ways and reintroduced an old fear of war in safe Europe. Many Europeans who strongly believed that we do not need to arm ourselves started to support militarisation. Using Sherry Arenstein's¹ understanding of citizen participation, these decisions likely reflected the stage of *Manipulation* of fear of war, comparing the bottom of "A Ladder of Citizen Participation" to non-participation.

Last but not least, when discussing participation as a form of democracy, the war that followed in Gaza revealed another aspect of civil society's empowerment. People worldwide began to organise themselves in protests against the war, against official politics, demanding an end to the war, to the killing, to the genocide. We can no longer deny it; most European politicians, who are supposed to represent the people of Europe, are not listening. There is a gap between what people demand on the streets of Europe and what or who their governments support. The Gaza war appears as the tragic crystallisation of many contradictions within our history and present. One of these is the belief in democracy, which is now clearly undergoing disintegration in the Western world.

Instead of developing and practising citizen participation as a form of democracy within the decision-making process concerning our immediate environment in relation to the burning question of climate change on a global scale, we had to start practising participation on the streets of our cities. Demonstrating to be heard, defending democracy against capitalism, which is transforming itself into the most inhumane form of economic organisation - to necrocapitalism,² "a contemporary form of organisational accumulation that involves dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death".

Notes

1 Sherry R. Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation", *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 35, issue 4 (1969): 216–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>

2 Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee. "Necrocapitalism", *Organizational Studies*, 29, issue 12 (December 2018): 1541–1563. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840607096386>

Apolonija Šušteršič is a visual artist, architect, researcher, and teacher. Her research-based practice is situated across different fields of spatial practice and critical theory. She works on projects that foster cooperation among people or groups. She creates processes for engagement and platforms for action where people are able to reconnect with their own sense of agency by getting involved in working with space and place.

She has a PhD in Performing and Visual Art from Lund University, Malmö Art Academy. Her professional experience includes three international professorships at renowned institutions, including the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, the Royal College of Art (London) and the Royal Institute of Art (Stockholm). She works as an independent researcher in the field of artistic research and collaborates on several research projects across academia, focusing on social and spatial justice.

She participated in a number of internationally published and exhibited projects within and beyond contemporary art institutions around the world, such as Moderna Museet Stockholm, Berlin Biennale 2, Luxembourg City of Culture, Moderna Galerija Ljubljana, Marian Goodman, Paris, 12th Architecture Biennale, Venice, Artes Mundi 5, Gwangju Biennial 2016, Timișoara Biennial 2019, and Diriyah Biennial 2024, among many others.

Participatory Art as an Act of Care

Mojca Puncer

As a theorist of philosophical provenance and as an art critic and curator in the field of contemporary art, I have been trying to understand and interpret various aspects of participatory art for more than a decade. During this time I have also been involved in curating participatory art projects: in collaboration with the Art Society of Celje (SI) and Goethe-Institut Prague I curated *BLOKI: Architecture of Human Relations* (2013–2015). I also co-curated the following exhibition *WE MEET AT SIX: Proposals for Communal Practices and Green Areas in Celje* (Center for Contemporary Arts Celje, 2015).¹ The insight into various art projects and artistic research methods informed and stimulated my own research and theoretical work. I investigated the “paradoxes of the politics of aesthetics” using the example of “artistic striving for community,”² the “avant-garde sources” and a “sense of discomfort in art criticism” using the example of participatory art,³ “artistic participation and the failure of democracy” in the context of Slovenia,⁴ “interspaces of art and social life” as “challenges for contemporary aesthetics”⁵ and “new public art as an emancipatory manifestation of local cultural identity,”⁶ to name the most representative topics. My approach is to undertake a broader analysis of the social context, including philosophical, cultural and socio-political theories, while attempting to critically reflect on this phenomenon of participatory art and evaluate its artistic, aesthetic, ethical and broader social significance. I drew inspiration from philosophers, cultural theorists and curators such as Jacques Rancière, Nicolas Bourriaud, Claire Bishop, James Thompson and Elke Krasny, to name but a few. Initially, I focused on discourses and concepts such as Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics,”⁷ followed by Bishop’s critique.⁸ Her well-known theory of participatory art (with the definition of participation in which “people constitute the central artistic medium and material”)⁹ is a complex, historical, practical, and theoretical (even philosophical) grounding, but it also brings problems. For me, it is important to note that Bishop rejects most of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of participatory art, or that she only advocates a certain kind of aesthetics of rupture, over-identification, and dissensus (in line with Rancière’s philosophical aesthetics).

Although I still consider the turn to participation in art relevant, the field of participatory art and the discourse around it has changed in the years since the publication of my earlier texts on this topic,¹⁰ including the general influence of neoliberalism on the cultural field. Therefore, I argue that there is a need to rethink participatory art and reassess the extent to which it can fulfill its main objectives in pursuing (democratic) change not only in the art world but in society in general. The potential of participatory art for non-hierarchical intersubjective relations and collaborations is undeniable, but only if it is conceived as part of long-term processes embedded in communities and not as experimental events in the specialized context of an art institution.¹¹

Although the results of participatory art can be documented, the most important aspect is the artist-initiated activity of the “audience,” which is constitutive of the artwork itself. I am interested in the processes within this activity and in the effects or outcomes of different participatory art projects. Here I must mention the post-Marxist analysis of artistic labor in neoliberal capitalism – I am also sensitized to this aspect, as well as to the aspects of the instrumentalization of this kind of art by European cultural policy.

As far as the conditions of production are concerned, participatory art is very much tied to the local context. Otherwise, participatory art is well represented in the post-socialist context of Slovenia: until the early 1990's, community-oriented art had moved from the periphery of the art world to the center. There are internationally recognized artists who deal with community and participation, such as Marjetica Potrč, Apolonija Šušteršič and Polonca Lovšin. There are also projects such as *Beyond a Construction Site* (community garden on a dormant construction site, KUD Obrat, Ljubljana, 2010–2022),¹² which I have written about several times, and events such as the *Admission Free* festival (a project of the Art Society of Celje since 1999)¹³ and related projects, in which I have also been involved as a researcher and curator.

Recently, I have paid particular attention to the primacy of social and ethical values over aesthetic and formal dimensions in participatory art. This emphasis has been criticized by Rancière and Bishop, for example, in the context of a supposed *care* for public/social space (e.g. in the sense of including the invisible, marginalized, neglected “other”) within a limited project duration in a given context.

The problem of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics has been addressed in various academic and artistic contexts, but I would like to emphasize that some related questions about the aesthetic and artistic criteria for the evaluation of participatory art are still unresolved. There is an interesting position of some analytically oriented aestheticians and philosophers of art who argue for a critical evaluation of the



Andreja Džakušič with coworkers, *Hanging Gardens*, 2015, installation in Gallery of Contemporary Art, exhibition of Andreja Džakušič, Daniela Krajčova, Simon Macuh, Estela Žutič & Gilles Duvivier: *WE MEET AT SIX. Proposals for Communal Practices and Green Areas in Celje*. Zavod CELEIA Celje – Center sodobnih umetnosti (Center for Contemporary Arts). Photo Tomaž Černej.



Andreja Džakušič with coworkers, *Hanging Gardens*, 2015, project *Architecture of Human Relations*, open atelje, Kare 9, Celje, setting of a raised bed. © DLUC (Društvo likovnih umetnikov Celje / Association of Fine Artists of Celje).

aesthetic value of participatory art as artistic (e.g. Carroll's functional account of art criticism that makes artistic value dependent on the artist's intentions, etc.).¹⁴ At this point, I would like to refer to Kuball's project *if walls could tell* and its utopian political claim to a "truly uncontrolled, decolonized public space".¹⁵ The artist is understood here less as an individual producer of discrete objects, but rather as a collaborator and producer of situations or conditions for open-ended participation in the sense of a cultural exchange between different urban contexts.

I found Krasny's¹⁶ discussion of the concept of care in art and the emergence of so-called care aesthetics by James Thompson¹⁷ particularly interesting. According to him, care is an important source of ethics in human relations, which can also be understood as an embodied or sensory practice in aesthetic terms. In this understanding, care aesthetics is part of a history of socially engaged art practice and scholarship. If I take Kuball's project as an example of an artistic intervention in an architectural and urban context, it could be seen as a case that shows the importance of care for the field of socially engaged art, especially those that involve participatory processes. I agree with Thompson that it is important to also pay attention to an aesthetics of care in art projects to show how many art processes demonstrate that care is realized through the activity of making and participating in art practices. This is about the integration of processes so that art making is also an act of caretaking. Art based on care aesthetics is therefore process- and relationship-oriented, and the aesthetic value lies in the activity of the participants, detached from the specific artifacts designed by the artists, and not in a specific representation or outcome.

Notes

1 See: "Andreja Džakušič, Daniela Krajčová, Simon Macuh, Estela Žutič & Gilles Duvivier WE MEET AT SIX. Proposals for communal practices and green areas in Celje," 11. 9. –18. 10. 2015, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Pokrajinski muzej Celje © 2025, accessed December 2025, <https://csu.si/en/exhibition/we-meet-at-six-proposals-for-communal-practices-and-green-areas-in-celje>

2 Mojca Puncer, "Paradoxes of the politics of aesthetics: artistic striving for community," *The aesthetic regime of art: dimensions of Rancière's theory*, International Conference, Ljubljana, 27.–28. November, 2015 (Conference Schedule and Abstracts, 15–16), accessed December 2025, <https://www.sde.si/files/2015/07/International-conference-Ranciere.pdf>

- 3** Mojca Puncer, “The politics of aesthetics of contemporary art in Slovenia and its avant-garde sources,” *Filozofski vestnik* 37, no. 1 (2016): 133–156, <https://ojs.zrc-sazu.si/filozofski-vestnik/article/view/4857>; Mojca Puncer, “Participatory art, philosophy and criticism,” *Filozofski vestnik* 40, no. 3 (2019): 241–260, <https://ojs.zrc-sazu.si/filozofski-vestnik/article/view/8132/7523>
- 4** Mojca Puncer, “Artistic participation and the failure of democracy: the case of Slovenia,” *Art and democracy: Symposium 8.–9. Juni 2018* (Programm), Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien © 2025, accessed December 2025, <https://webportal-preproduction.akbild.ac.at/de/institute/kunstlerisches-lehramt/veranstaltungen/aktuelles/2018/art-and-democracy/SubEvent>
- 5** Mojca Puncer, “Interspaces of art – challenges for contemporary aesthetics,” *Art + media* 19 (September 2019): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i19.313>
- 6** Mojca Puncer, “New public art as an emancipatory manifestation of local cultural identity,” *8th Mediterranean Congress of Aesthetics: Aesthetics of Everyday Life in Contemporary Cities*, 9.–11. September 2021, webinar (Book of Abstracts, 132–133), accessed December 2025, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/65840775/book-of-abstracts/132>
- 7** Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2002).
- 8** Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 11 (Fall 2004): 51–79.
- 9** Claire Bishop, *Artificial hells: participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*. (London: Verso, 2012), 2.
- 10** Mojca Puncer, “Community-based (artistic) practices as a new spatial ecology in Celje,” in *We Meet at Six: Proposals for Communal Practices and Green Areas in Celje*, ed. Irena Čerčnik (Celje: Zavod Celeia, Center sodobnih umetnosti; Ljubljana: KUD Mreža, Galerija Alkatraz, 2015), 5–10.
- 11** I agree here with Milevska – see Suzana Milevska, *Participatory Art: A Paradigm Shift from Object to Subject* (Skopje: ZG Kontrapunkt, 2023), <https://kontrapunkt.mk.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/suzana-milevska-ang-za-web.pdf>
- 12** Obrat, “Beyond a Construction Site,” 18. 10. 2022, accessed December 2025, <https://obrat.org/en/projects/2022/beyond-a-construction-site>
- 13** “Admission Free Festival,” CULTURE.SI, Ministry of Culture of Republic of Slovenia, updated July 28, 2025, accessed December 2025, https://www.culture.si/en/Admission_Free_Festival
- 14** See e.g. Matilde Carrasco-Barranco, “Artistic Aesthetic Value in Participatory Art,” *Philosophies* 10, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies10020029>
- 15** Zoran Erić, E-mail message to author, April 1, 2025.
- 16** Elke Krasny, “Architecture and Care,” in *Critical Care: Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet*, eds. Angelika Fitz & Elke Krasny (Vienna: Architekturzentrum Wien & The MIT Press, 2019), 33–41; Elke Krasny, “Care,” *AA Files*, 76 (2019): 38–39; Elke Krasny, “Scales of Concern: Feminist Spatial Practices,” in *Empowerment. Art and Feminism*, eds. Andreas Beutin, Katharina Koch, and Uta Ruhkamp (Wolsburg: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 2022), 184–186; Elke Krasny, *Living with an Infected Planet: COVID-19, Feminism, and the Global Frontline of Care* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2023); Elke Krasny & Lara Perry, “Introduction,” in *Curating with Care*, eds. Elke Krasny & Lara Perry (London: Routledge), 1–10.
- 17** James Thompson, *Care Aesthetics: For Artful Care and Careful Art* (London: Routledge, 2023).

Mojca Puncer received her PhD in philosophy from the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. She is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Maribor. She teaches at the Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Education, as well as at the Faculty of Design and AMEU ISH in Ljubljana. She also works as a freelance curator, critic, and theorist in contemporary art. She is a member of the editorial board of the fine arts magazine *Artwords* and serves on the executive committee of the Slovenian Society of Aesthetics. Her work has been published in numerous publications in Slovenia and abroad. She is the author of the books *Contemporary Art and Aesthetics* (2010) and *Interspaces of Art* (2018). She conducts research in the philosophy of art and culture, aesthetics, art theory, fine art, visual culture, and new media theory. Her main interests include artistic research, participation, performativity, the body, space, art in social space, new media art, and the relationship between art and science. She recently published scientific papers in journals such as *Philosophies* and *FKW: Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur*.

Reflections on *if walls could tell*

Eda Čufer

We could consider that not only the walls could talk, but that everything is talking, whispering, twinkling, all the time. Twinkling words, images, faces, screams, you name it. Meaningful births and deaths everywhere. And also lightning, storms, explosions. Sometimes the message is sublime, but more often it is destructive. Even darkness still talks, and silence whispers something, just about all the time, sometimes as a resounding scream. Who is there to hear it? Who is brave enough to bring the overwhelming density of messages of the broken world into some kind of action or at least some sort of conscience, speaking meaningfully to us all?

Is this the question asked by Mischa Kuball's ambitious art project *if walls could tell* which, in 2024 and 2025, spread its conceptual wings from first, Sarajevo, followed by Bucharest, Skopje, Chişinău, Ljubljana, Kraljevica and Čačak? Each city received a few empty walls to be erected in the public space and left there for some time followed by debates in museums or galleries, where the results of the spontaneous public creativity and interventions would be available to audiences to see and to critical eyes to evaluate and discuss. Joining the discussion initiated by this project in Ljubljana as one of the panelists, I was provoked to rethink and reevaluate, not so much the 'speaking' walls in front of Vžigalica Gallery in Ljubljana, but my own memories and expectations. Belonging to the generation of the 1980's, which was by necessity political, utopian and wonderfully naive, I expected the messages to be, if not openly political, then at least rebellious. Well, they were neither, although creative, expressive and beautiful in a surprising way, which speaks to the success of the project. It's about time for me to grow up and accept that the world had changed. But more importantly, the map of the project brought into focus some more or less forgotten places in South Eastern Europe, or let's call it "deep Balkans", where five out of eight cities in play once belonged to a country now called the "former Yugoslavia". That was also the country of my birth and I remember how, after its demise in the 1990's, my generation embraced the utopia of art to (re)build, (re)construct and nourish broken relationships, not only between once culturally and politically connected ex-Yugoslavian nations and communities but also *vis a vis* Europe and the world as a whole.

The concept and ideology of 'Relational Aesthetics'¹, which took over the art world by the end of 1990's and the first decade of the new millennium, fueled this utopia until it dissolved into thin air. What Kuball's post-Relational Aesthetics project revealed to me through its choice of cities and region is how little or nothing I know about the life and struggles in separate corners of this region now. Less than ever, I would say, which is quite an uncomfortable feeling, charged with shame and guilt even. But can museums, galleries and cultural activities in conjunction with linked networks fix the lack of connectivity and information available, that, as it seems, *if walls could tell*, wants to suggest? Or do we need something more that will unlikely happen after decades of EU enlargement? Something like the *IENN* (Independent European News Network), perhaps, that would bring stories and news from both larger and smaller corners of Europe as well as the World, stirring up new dynamics to build a new base on which art and culture can grow, thrive, reflect, structure and change. A new culture, awareness and conscience that we all need and long for.

Notes

I Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational aesthetics*. Les presses du réel, 2022.

Eda Čufer is a dramaturge, curator, writer and professor of contemporary art history and theory. In 1984 she co-founded the art collective NSK based in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Between 2005 and 2020 she lived in the USA where she taught in the art history and liberal arts departments of the Maine College of Art. She is the recipient of a grant from Andy Warhol Foundation/Creative Capital for a book project which is still in progress. The focus of her research and writings is concerned with the ideologies of contemporary art, especially with the relationship between political, technological and art systems.

Kraljevica

Croatia

Frankopan Castle

Inauguration: April 23, 2025

Kraljevica is a small coastal town in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County of Croatia, situated on the Kvarner Bay between the mainland and the island of Krk. Its history as a port and fishing community stretches back to the medieval period, and from the twelfth to the seventeenth century it was part of the territory controlled by the Croatian noble families Frankopan and Zrinski, who built two castles in the town, both of which survive. The Frankopan family in particular left an extensive heritage of castles and sacred buildings across the Kvarner region. After the execution of the last Frankopan and Zrinski leaders in Vienna in 1671 for conspiracy against Habsburg rule, the town continued as a maritime community, and its historic shipyard is among the oldest on the Adriatic. In the twentieth century Kraljevica, like much of coastal Croatia, developed a tourism economy alongside its traditional fishing and maritime industries.



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In recent years, the restored Frankopan Castle has become the first station on the cultural route “The Routes of the Frankopans” and has also emerged as a venue for contemporary art programming and international collaboration through the 3RD-SPC./RP project. The 3RD-SPC./RP project raises questions that are central to this catalogue’s broader concerns: who constitutes the public for artistic projects in a small community with a specific local identity, and how does participatory art engage residents beyond the networks of the art world? The project *if walls could tell* proposes to address this directly by offering blank white walls in public space as a surface for collective citizen expression, using the concept of commoning space to explore whether participatory creative processes can establish new social relations and repair community bonds in a context shaped by seasonal tourism, postindustrial transition, and a deep but not always visible historical heritage.

– by Vero Róza Risnovska

Panel discussion:

The Participatory Art as a Commoning Space

The Frankopan Castle, located in the small port township of Kraljevica, has emerged as a significant cultural and artistic hub, fostering international collaborations and art exchanges. Its cutting-edge art programs explore themes of cultural diversity and the transdisciplinary collaborative production of art events, as exemplified by the 3RD-SPC./RP project.

The question of who constitutes the public in these projects remains a subject of ongoing debate. Is it solely the art world, or does the broader local community relate to these initiatives? What is their role and impact, if any? This panel will therefore focus on the potential of participatory art practices in fostering community engagement through collaborative processes. The project proposal *if walls could tell*, aims to initiate the co-creation of artwork by the citizens themselves, with the artist providing only blank white walls, placed in public space, to invite their expression.

The project intends to test the assumption that such collective creative processes empower participants, transforming them from passive consumers of art into active co-authors of shared experiences. The central theoretical framework of this discussion will be the concept of *commoning space*. In this context, the term *commoning* carries a more nuanced discursive meaning than the traditional theory of the commons. It offers the potential for creating shared spaces in which participation in the creative process can establish new social relations among diverse local groups, thereby "repairing" the broken bonds of what Jean-Luc Nancy has termed the "inoperative community."

– by Zoran Erić







Panel discussion "The Participatory Art as a Commoning Space", April 23, 2025, with Branka Benčić, Sanja Bojanić, Igor Eškinja, Lina Franko, and Zoran Erić



Choreography of Exposure

Igor Eškinja

The project *if walls could tell* had one of its venues in the small Croatian town of Kraljevica and involved a group of students, local teenagers, and passersby during a week at the end of April 2025. Solid white walls were constructed in a public square and the local community was invited to leave marks or traces of any kind. At the beginning, participation consisted of a few shy gestures. The white walls were authoritarian as a newly built construction in a public space, but at some point, they began to amass marks, which became a clear invitation for everyone who wanted to participate in this shared creation. The walls were filled with overlapping gestures, signs, comments, and drawings and were shown in the Rhizom (K) Gallery space of the Frankopan Castle in Kraljevica. This time, the public intervention around the walls was intended as a platform for discussion among the group of curators, artists, and museum directors and was only later left for the gaze of gallery visitors.

The walls can be described as a metaphor of absorption: opaque surfaces saturated with invisible layers of sounds, breaths, humidity, and light, absorbing our collective thoughts and imaginary projections. They can be seen as a safe barrier that gives us distance and the possibility to contemplate the world behind their impenetrable materiality, creating a sense of proximity and closure.

In the case of the project *if walls could tell*, we are dealing with a very different concept.

The idea of community is choreographed around the concept of exposure. It is not only a gesture of stepping out of the private domain (in this case institutional or gallery), but intended as a space with a limited or specialized audience that extends to the public space of the square (open to every person) and is a carrier of transformative experience. In this case, both the participants and the walls are exposed to each other in an asymmetric constellation. Walls act as sculptural displays immersed in the specific location and community that inhabits the town of Kraljevica. Conversely, local (unprompted) participants are exposed to newly encountered situations where they are invited to interact and leave traces in ways that potentially transform how they relate to objects in public space. By interacting with the white walls and leaving messages, participants enter into a complex relation not only with the surface but also with each other, where personal and collective actions are intertwined in unpredictable ways. Sometimes traces passively accumulate, sometimes they are reactions to one another; and sometimes they are erased by a new layer of paint. The formal aspect of traces begins to reveal the logic of the participating community as much as its conceptual frame. In the final instance, the whole process of transformative actions is made visible to the gallery audiences and panel participants. Exposure becomes an agent that unites different elements of this complex process and choreographs relations that can be seen as an attempt to build a different experience of community.

Igor Eškinja (Croatia, 1975.) lives and work in Rijeka, Croatia. Eskinja graduated from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice, Italy in 2002. Since then he participated in various group exhibitions such as *Manifesta 7*, Rovereto (2008); *Complicity*, Rena Bransten gallery, San Francisco (2009); *28 Grafični Biennale*,

Ljubljana (2009); Dirt, Welcome foundation, London, (2011), Rearview Mirror, Power plant, Toronto, (2011); Ash and Gold – a world tour, Marta Herford, (2012); 2nd Ural Industrial Biennale, Ekaterinburg, (2012); 8 ways to overcome space and time, Museum of contemporary art, Belgrade, (2013), T-ht nagrada, MSU, Zagreb (2016.), Every Time A Ear di Soun – Documenta 14 program, Savvy contemporary, Berlin (2017), PRODUCTIVE WORK what is it supposed to be?, Q21, Museums quartier, Vienna, (2018.), Works from the collection, MAXXI, Rome, (2020.) Solo exhibitions include: Project for unsuccessful gathering, Casino Luxembourg-Forum d’art contemporain, Luxembourg (2009.), Inhabitants of generic places, Kunstforum, Vienna, Museum of Contemporary Art-Zagreb (2011), The Day After, Federico Luger gallery, Milano, (2011); Interieur Captivant, MAC/VAL Museum, Vitry, (2012); Quixote, MUWA, Graz, (2014), Do plants dream..., EPK, Rijeka (2020), Exposures Kunsthalle Bratislava (2021.).

On Site-Specific Publicness and Collective Articulation

Lina Franko and Andi Slawinski

When the project *if walls could tell* was realized in April 2025 in collaboration with the art association RIZOM [K] in the atrium of the Frankopan Castle in Kraljevica, it encountered a topography shaped by remarkable historical depth and complex contemporary dynamics. Kraljevica — once a renowned spa town under the Habsburg monarchy and later home to one of the oldest shipyards on the Adriatic coast — today exemplifies the post-industrial tensions that characterize many peripheral European cities marked by economic ruptures, social hybridity, and an urban public sphere in the process of reconfiguration.

It is precisely within such constellations that our long-term European project 3RD-SPC./RP has been situated since 2019. Together with local and international partners, we develop formats that understand contemporary art as a transversal practice — a medium that operates on the margins and opens up in-between spaces. The collaboration with *if walls could tell* was not merely a cooperation, but a rhizomatic expansion of our curatorial and artistic approach: conceptually open, structurally permeable, and politically clear in its stance.



3RD-SPC./RP – no. 4, *Time Dilation and EU/rope – a Matter of Perspective*, THE HALF THROUGH, choreography by Daniela Georgieva, installation by Martin Pfeifle, with Christoph Speit, Snorre Elvin and David Kummer, Football Field Marakana, Kraljevica, 2023. Photo: Juraj Vuglač.

Mischa Kuball's intervention — consisting of three mobile white walls, each split into two segments and precisely aligned with the historical colonnade of the atrium — activated the space not as a site of representation, but as a matrix of expression. In a short time, the atrium of the castle transformed into a vibrant forum: a space of remembering, questioning, writing, and drawing — together with local residents, tourists, teenagers, and students from the APU RI Academy in Rijeka.

The responses were spontaneous, polyphonic, and translingual as people wrote, drew, and commented in Croatian, German, Italian, and English. The walls were not treated as neutral surfaces, but as resonant membranes of collective articulation. The invitation to participate was not verbally issued, but rather embedded in the spatial configuration, in the material, and in the gesture itself. *If walls could tell* thus became a social and aesthetic dispositif — ephemeral, porous, open to contingency.

Within the framework of 3RD-SPC./RP, the local population has long been involved through interdisciplinary exhibitions, performances, discursive formats, and artistic residencies, that have established a familiar framework since 2019. Yet *if walls could tell* marked a new dimension of participatory openness — one in which the boundaries between authorship and reception dissolve, and every participant becomes an active subject of the unfolding process. The walls turned into performative archives where drawings, political messages, personal memories, and linguistic traces formed a polyphonic image of the present.



3RD-SPC./RP – no. 4, *Time Dilation and EU/rope – a Matter of Perspective*, panel discussion, Art Association RIZOM [K], Frankopan Castle, Kraljevica, 2023. Photo: Juraj Vuglač.

In the accompanying panel discussion, we reflected on the fragility, potential, and contradictions of participatory artistic practices. What kinds of shared spaces can be temporarily created without being instrumentalized or narrowed by affirmative agendas? What responsibilities arise for artists, institutions, and curators when authorship is shared?

The art association RIZOM [K] embraced the opportunity to present *if walls could tell* as a paradigmatic instance of participatory art – not as a methodological instrument, but as a relational praxis: a space of productive uncertainty, negotiation, and aesthetic-political counter-narratives against hegemonic logics of representation. In this sense, *if walls could tell* constituted a socio-aesthetic constellation – one that created space for rethinking the very notion of publicness and collective articulation.

Lina Franko and **Andi Slawinski**, artistic–curatorial duo, are founders and artistic directors of the transdisciplinary project 3RD-SPC./RP (*3rd Space – European Research and Practice*), which they have jointly developed since 2019. Building on the partner associations RHIZOM [D] and RIZOM [K], they are shaping a long-term European programme that interweaves exhibitions, film-based works, performances, residencies and site-specific interventions. Their practice moves between curatorial research, installation, moving image, spatial dramaturgy and collaborations with local communities. Working between Germany and Croatia, they focus on decentralised exhibition formats, international residency programmes and site-specific interventions realised with MMSU Rijeka, NMMU Zagreb, Kunsthau NRW Kornelimünster and other partners in North Rhine-Westphalia. As a founder of RIZOM [K], Franko defines the project’s curatorial direction with a focus on visual arts and, together with Slawinski, has developed key exhibition sequences including *Δ. A Tipping Point* (2025), *Tišina vjetra – The Poetry of Multilingualism* (2024), *Time Dilation and EU/rope – a Matter of Perspective* (2023), *I.D.entity and EU/ropa – wer ist das ICH das spricht* (2022) and *An opening without events – A European artifice in coronatimes* (2021). Slawinski, as founder of RHIZOM [D], contributes a focus on film, video and performance, combining visual, performative and collaborative strategies. Since 2020 Franko and Slawinski have also worked as an artistic duo, presenting their work internationally. They are currently developing the sixth project phase, *3RD-SPC./RP – Još ne. – In Absence of a Map*, to be realised in 2026 with Kunsthau NRW Kornelimünster, further advancing the project’s dialogical approach to artistic research and contemporary exhibition practice.

Old Factory New Capital: The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka (MMSU)

Branka Benčić

An attempt to reflect on the experiences of the project *if walls could tell* brings forward the opportunity to open a conversation about a constellation of practices at the MMSU - Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, and explore some of its historical relations and reconnections. To frame this exploration, I have borrowed the title from an artwork by Igor Grubić, a text-based work and recent intervention in the form of a banner on the museum facade, reading *Old Factory, New Capital* (MMSU, 2024). Practices that frame the notion of plural publics recognize that communities are not monolithic but consist of overlapping identities. A community is not understood as a homogeneous body but as a meeting place — an intersection of different positions, voices, identities, and subjects. This reframes the notion of identity not as a fixed concept but as a polyphony of codes, both personal and collective, situated at the crossroads of multiple social and cultural layers. Thus, participatory art can serve as a platform for multiple publics to engage, negotiate, and build collective agency, posi-



Igor Grubić: *Old Factory New Capital*, work on the facade, exhibition: *Gestures of Activation*, 2024. MMSU Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Rijeka; Courtesy of MMSU. Photography: Hrvoje Franjić

tioning itself not merely as a method but as an ethical and political gesture. Rethinking the notion of 'being-with' (as individuals are always already part of shared experiences), instills plurality as inherently inscribed within the very idea of the public.

Growing a community is a long-term, durational, and precarious process, often marked by instability. The Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka engages in diverse forms of community building along its historical trajectory of institution-building, since its establishment in 1948 as a new institution for a new society — first within the socialist country that emerged after the Second World War, and its relocations in search of a space, to the current venue, repurposed industrial building, tracing histories that reconnect the Museum with institutional and artistic practices dedicated to reclaiming public space. This legacy is inscribed in institutional and programmatic policies and perspectives that continue to reshape the worldview and the relationship between art and society. The new neighbourhood represents an effort to initiate a potential new beginning. Within this horizon, different museum departments — collection, education, exhibition, documentation — work together to activate, engage, and inspire audiences through a multifaceted program for a transgenerational community. From this perspective, participatory art at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka is considered less a fixed object than a moving target, a permeable space of encounter between artists, audiences, and the city. The museum is thus understood not as a container of singular voices but as a site where publics emerge in plurality and difference.



David Maljković: *With the Collection*, installation view, MMSU Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Rijeka, 2020. Courtesy of MMSU



Curatorial Clique, workshop documentation, MMSU Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Rijeka, 2024. Courtesy of MMSU. Photo: Tanja Kanazir



Kiosk, community project, documentation, MMSU Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Rijeka, 2024. Courtesy of MMSU.

The dynamic interplay between participatory art and community engagement is both exhibited and enacted, infusing the institution with the vitality of ideas, voices, and gestures. Looking back at the museum's exhibition histories — whether it was shows that trace the historical trajectory of interaction between the museum, the city, and the audience, or those that engage artistic and social imagination — one finds exhibitions that bring into public discourse themes and issues relevant to society, or that propose a provisional set of possible instructions for use.

Parallel to exhibitionary activity, recent educational projects — ranging from guided walks that highlight the neighbourhood, contexts, or industrial heritage of the museum building's former function, to intergenerational workshops and inclusive community co-curation — reimagine the museum as “common ground.” Initiatives such as the *Curatorial Circle*, which experiments with co-creation by involving citizens in drafting exhibition mediation texts, selecting artworks, interpreting the collection, and organizing displays, transform the museum into a forum of many voices. Here, each participant teaches and learns, proposing possible corrections to established narratives in the process of re-reading, re-arranging, strengthening, and rebuilding a sense of belonging. In this context, exhibitions alongside MMSU's community-engaged workshops form a critical continuum: one that resists the museum's traditional authority and redefines it as a space of listening, contradiction, plurality, belonging, and a shared horizon.

Branka Benčić is a curator and art historian based in Croatia with research and curatorial interests in contemporary art and exhibition histories of the former Yugoslavia. She is the director of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka (MMSU), where she has curated and co-curated exhibitions, research projects and public programs. She was commissioner and curator of the Croatian Pavillion at 57th Venice Biennale (2017). Recently, she guest curated the annual Keller Kino at Kunsthaus Graz and curated the theme program *Solidarity as Disruption* at the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen. She was artistic director and co-founder of an independent art organization Apoteka. She has curated international group and solo exhibitions and film screenings independently, lectured on contemporary art and published in exhibition catalogues, books and journals.

A Note from the Wall: a gdje si ti?

Sanja Bojanić

Driving from Rijeka to Kraljevica, to the Frankopan Castle, on April 25th 2025, at the invitation of Mischa Kuball, Zoran Erić, Lina Franko, and Andi Slawinski, in the early afternoon with the metallic reflections of the sun on the sea carried by the bora wind and a gentle drizzle, I kept repeating to myself Rimbaud's words about the doubling — or splitting — of the self from the one who creates: *Je est un autre* (*I is Other*). This cryptic and revolutionary formulation, born from the mouth of a teenage poet, has long been a guiding mantra for artists, especially in the Francophone world. It acts as a shibboleth, a whispered code for those who, in the act of making, step outside the sealed chambers of identity to encounter the world through dissonance, rupture, and play. Rushing into the embrace of the other — the unknown, the uncanny, the not-yet-self — *I* who becomes *Other* reshapes any perception and envisions art not as self-expression, but as transformation; not reflection, but upheaval. After this mantra, an artist was no longer the stable subject but a vessel of becoming, a site of contamination within the world.

Mischa and Zoran were on a road trip, visiting various cities and bringing white walls like huge open white books — large, zigzagged, and vibrant white books they left for unknown hands to draw and paint upon. This is how they came to the Frankopan Castle — a 17th-century fortress tied to noble power, shifting sovereignties, and cultural negotiation. They brought the white walls into the castle courtyard, prepared their installation, and invited children, young people, students, retirees, unknown poets and artists who do not know they are artists, and the residents of Kraljevica to intervene, paint, and draw on the tall immaculate walls. Their walls immediately merged with the castle walls, which have witnessed much: aristocratic decline, war, abandonment, and now, cultural reawakening. In Giorgio Agamben's terms, this installation enters the realm of "profanation": the return of what was once sacred — walled, guarded, monumental — into the sphere of common use. The castle, once a symbol of exclusivity, becomes public, writable, and unguarded. "Restoring to common use what had been separated in the realm of the sacred" defines profanation,¹ and Kuball's walls enact this precisely. They do not merely "exhibit" the space — they undo its hierarchy by inviting scribbles, laughter, doubt, and participation.

With Mischa's space and participatory intervention, the white walls in the castle became both a backdrop and a subject, co-authoring their artistic inquiry. Rimbaud's radical reimagining of the self, which is fractured, polyphonic, and fundamentally other to itself, infiltrated and exposed itself publicly. They thus received a new language of participatory art and became connectors and disrupters.

At the top of one of the walls, just beside a black cartoonish figure, I saw written or painted in bold; *A gdje si ti?* (*So where are you?*). I wondered, is this a message or a joyful game of hide-and-seek among participants? To whom was it addressed? A stranger? A future self? Or to the fractured *I* now drawn out into the world? Was this a possible dialogue with Rimbaud or a pronounced riddle for all, where language, space, and participation intersect? Yet, on these white walls, language ceases to represent. It acted. It moved. It connected castle stones, childlike gestures, philosophical echoes, and the porous figure of an anonymous artist. It confirmed *Je est un autre* (*I is another*), and then asked: *A gdje si ti?* (*So where are you?*).

Notes

I Giorgio Agamben, "In Praise of Profanation." In *Profanations*, translated by Jeff Fort, (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 73–92.

Sanja Bojanić is engaged in the philosophy of culture, focusing on contemporary issues of gender, race, and class that intensify social and affective inequalities. She completed her initial studies in philosophy, later earning an M.A. in Hypermedia Studies and a PhD from the Centre d'Études féminines et d'étude de genre at the University of Paris 8. Her work spans interdisciplinary research involving experimental artistic practices, queer studies, and affect theory. Sanja's professional career has included positions at the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art (Louvre, Paris), the Nouvel Observateur, and the Laboratory for Evaluation and Development of Digital Editing at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Paris Nord, St. Denis). Before her current position as Executive Director of the Centre for Advanced Studies Southeast Europe (CAS SEE) at the University of Rijeka, she taught at the Universities of Aberdeen and Paris 8. She teaches Semiotics, New Media Theories and Practices, and Visual Methodologies at the Academy of Applied Arts in Rijeka. The EU Commission, the Volkswagen Foundation, UNESCO and others have supported her extensive research projects. She is the author of several books and over forty peer-reviewed papers, making significant contributions to her fields of study.

Čačak

Serbia

Art Gallery Nadežda Petrović Inauguration: June 5, 2025

Čačak is a mid-sized city in central Serbia, situated in the valley of the Western Morava River at the foot of the Ovčar and Kablar mountains. The area has been settled since the Neolithic period, and Roman remains including the ruins of a *thermae* are visible in the city centre today. The city was founded in its medieval form by Prince Stracimir and developed through the Ottoman and Serbian imperial periods into a regional centre of commerce, education, and administration. In the nineteenth century, as the modern Serbian state consolidated, Čačak grew rapidly and established a number of civic and cultural institutions. The painter Nadežda Petrović was born here in 1873. She studied in Munich and Paris and produced a body of work spanning symbolism, impressionism, fauvism and especially, expressionism that is considered foundational to modern Serbian painting. She is also remembered for her social and humanitarian activism and for her work as a wartime nurse, during which she died of typhus in 1915.

The Art Gallery “Nadežda Petrović,” founded in 1961 and located in a building from 1911 originally constructed as a Women’s Workers’ School, is named in her honour and holds a collection of nearly 1,800 works of contemporary artistic production (paintings, sculptures, videos, public space installations). Its biennial Nadežda Petrović Memorial, established in 1960, has grown into one of the more significant contemporary art exhibitions in Serbia and has brought international attention to the city. The gallery has also been the site of repeated tensions between artistic practice and public reception: several works exhibited in public space as part of the Memorial have been vandalised, removed, or censored following complaints from residents or orders from the municipal inspectorate. These incidents raise questions that this project addresses directly: whether public



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art can function as a diagnostic of social tensions and ideological divisions, and whether cultural institutions are able to protect artistic expression from external pressure or remain permeable to populist sentiment and civic outrage.

– by Vero Róza Risnovska

Panel discussion:

Art in Public Space – Documents of Destruction

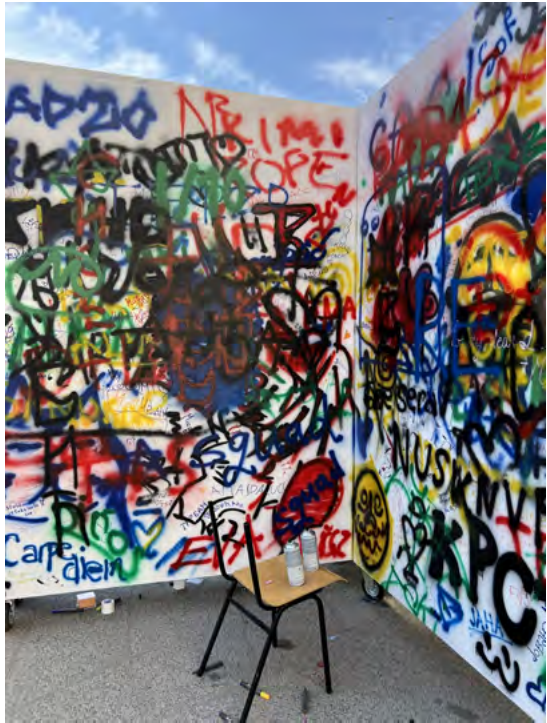
In societies marked by deep social and political tensions, public space often becomes a contested arena in which artistic expression is vulnerable to acts of aggression, vandalism, and even censorship. Artworks placed in these shared spaces can provoke strong emotional reactions, serving both as catalysts for dialogue and as flashpoints for conflict.

This issue has been particularly evident in recent editions of the “Nadežda Petrović” Memorial in Čačak, where several publicly exhibited artworks have been subjected to damage, removal, or censorship. One notable example is *Fake ID* (2002) by Miodrag Krkobabić, which was installed in a “city-light” advertising panel and later targeted in a vandalistic attack. Another case involves the work of Italian artist Luca Vittoni, *Nothing to Say, Just Be*, presented in 2007 along the city promenade. Following complaints from local citizens claiming the work “offended their sensibilities,” the municipal inspectorate ordered its removal.

These incidents are emblematic of broader societal dynamics and highlight the precarious position of art in public contexts. They raise critical questions: can public art serve as a diagnostic tool for exposing societal fault lines, anxieties, and ideological divisions? And to what extent can cultural institutions serve as protected environments for artistic expression, or are they also permeable to external pressures, populist sentiments, and forms of civic outrage?

– by Zoran Erić







Panel discussion "Art in Public Space – Documents of Destruction", June 5, 2025, with Mariela Cvetić, Jasmina Čubrilo, Bojan Djordjev, Predrag Živković, and Zoran Erić



The Upcoming Community: *if walls could tell* Mariela Cvetić

A wall, in architecture, is a spatial element that separates space, whether internal or external. Three such elements were initially displayed, accessible and open to “everyone,” ready to accept traces of “everything” in the central area of the city. These elements were then brought into the space of the institution/museum and displayed again for analysis and discussion. The work represents an example of architectural intervention, as well as a performative act in public space (both external and internal) that offers the possibility for participatory engagement of the community in the process. The work is situated in the field of participatory projects, i.e. practices recognized within the field of art that bring about change from establishing relationships between objects to establishing relationships between subjects, which shift the focus of artists from dealing with objects and installations to engaging with subjects and enabling their participation in artistic activities. Historical artistic examples date back to the early twentieth century and have distant predecessors in; the practice of Italian futurism (*Serate futuriste*), the revolutionary practice of the Soviet Union (“Attack on the Winter Palace,” 1920, Leningrad, reenactment of the revolution), a series of Dada manifestations (André Breton, “Artificial Paradises,” 1921, Paris). The theoretical foundation for analysis includes texts starting from Umberto Eco’s “Poetics of the Open Work,” “Avant-garde Negations of the Autonomy of Art” by Peter Bürger, via Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author” to Nicolas Bourriaud’s “Relational Aesthetics” and Claire Bishop’s “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.”

Dominantly inscribed on the work/wall are words, most often handwritten, crossed out/erased, rewritten, one stenciled. The first question arises: do walls “speak”/“communicate” words as text, singularly or in a multitude/plurality? Furthermore, the institution (curators) and the audience groups (high school students), where a role reversal and a process of decolonization of positions in the art world occurs is often readable and recognizable. From this arises a second question: is it possible to conceive participatory art outside the verification regime of the institution of art? The criterion for evaluating participatory artwork is not (only) aesthetic and according to Claire Bishop, the aestheticization of participation is reflected in the replacement of “monologue” with “dialogue” and is, above all, political and ethical. The “relations” produced by this work are assessed, as are the consequences within a given constellation, both temporal and spatial, as well as societal.

A third question therefore arises: to what extent does the current sociopolitical situation, which has lasted for more than six months, free up social relations that were previously unimaginable, especially in this case where the relationships established between the audience and the artistic object are not directed by specific formal instructions from the artist? Furthermore, does the (empty) space of presumed vandalism and destruction — which has often been the case — “speak” through the multitude by leaving traces in signatures, banal slogans that pop into one’s head, commonplace problems in society, culture, and art? What emerges from the clutter of voices within the multitude?

Finally, does the observation by the participants in the discussion, which a small number of attendees interpret as a primary consequence of societal immaturity and disinterest, testify to discomfort (the tension between observers, participants, context) stemming from dissatisfaction with the community? This can also be the result of social antagonism (Claire Bishop, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe), since social antagonism is a condition for participation. Ultimately, perhaps dissatisfaction with the community and the discomfort of being a member opens the possibility of that coming community (Italian: *La comunità che viene*) by Giorgio Agamben as a critique of existing forms of community and an attempt to envision a community not based on identities, essences, or belonging, but on the pure power of being — what Agamben calls “community without predicates,” a community as an open space where a being can be what it is without the need to be confirmed or verified.

Mariela Cvetić is an artist, art theorist, and full professor at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Belgrade. She is head of the doctoral study program Theory of Art and Media at the Interdisciplinary Studies University of the Arts in Belgrade. She is also the author of a large number of solo exhibitions, artist's books and a participant in numerous group exhibitions. She is one of the authors of the exhibition in the Serbian pavilion at the 11th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice in 2008. She organized exhibitions of artists' books by students of the Faculty of Architecture. She published the book “Das Unheimliche: psychoanalytic and cultural theories of space” (Belgrade, 2011), “Artist's Book” (Belgrade, 2014), “On scale: monumentalizing the miniaturized” with Jasmina Čubrilo (Belgrade, 2019), as well as a large number of chapters in monographs. In her artistic and theoretical work, she deals with the problem of the relationship between subject and space.

Contested Public Space

Bojan Djordjev

In the local, Serbian context, there is a lack of consensus on the purpose of the public space in general. Public space is increasingly commercialised and privatised as a direct attack on and dismantling of the socialist / social welfare / common goods heritage. There is forthright destruction and vandalism of monuments – for years the busts of the People’s heroes of Yugoslavia’s graves at the Kalemegdan park (Đaković, Ribar, Milutinović, Pijade) were vandalised persistently. In 2023 – *Shoes no 43*, a monument to Vjeran Miladinović Merlinka (the first openly trans person in Serbia, sex worker and film/media personality 1958-2003) placed near the Belgrade bus station, was destroyed 3 days after its inauguration. There are many more examples like this.

Artistic interventions in public space unmistakably capture the atmosphere of these unofficial, mini civil wars. Branislav Nikolić’s sculpture *Infinite column* (2019) in Ččačak, made up of 11 toilet bowls – as the artist’s nod to Duchamp, Buñuel and Brâncuși – was damaged weeks after its installation. It seems that “plumbing objects” hit the very heart of the petit bourgeoisie’s sense of propriety. The artistic statement in the public



Branislav Nikolić, *Endless Column*, 2019, ceramics, 440x46x36 cm Photo credits: Branislav Nikolić , The work was realized as part of the joint exhibition of Zolt Kovač and Branislav Nikolić *Surviving the work*, winner of the audience award at the 27th Nadežda Petrović Memorial in 2014.



Katarina Popović, *Don't Forget to Breathe*, since 2022. 31st Nadežda Petrović Memorial, 2022.
Photographies: Milenko Savović and Predrag Živković.

space became a provocation. The public responded radically to the provocation – with destruction.

There are also more discreet interventions and dialogues initiated by artists in public space. Another example from Čačak is a work by Katarina Popović *Don't forget to breathe* (2022) – manifested via the planting of 10 *Paulownia elongata* on an unused plot in the centre of the city. After only two and a half years this tiny plot has become a new city forest providing shade and oxygen and a different protocol of dialogue on commons and public good between artist, public institutions and citizens.

A tragic accident – the structural collapse of a canopy in the recently renovated railway station in Novi Sad - took 16 lives in November of 2024. With the student protests initiating a wider social movement asking for an official investigation and justice in this case of negligence and corruption, the dissensus on public space became even more pronounced. The right to mourn, commemorate and protest was contested by violent verbal and physical outbursts, condoned and organized in most cases by the ruling party. As I write these notes (June 2025), there are two encampments occupying Belgrade's public space within one square kilometre distance from each other and both

in front of government buildings; the one is sponsored by the government objecting to the student protests; and the other protests new legislature that destroys the universities' autonomy.

The success of students mobilising a very large portion of society for support and self-organisation is due to the re-invention of public space and through more or less deliberate reference to the tactics of 1970's performance art. Long commemorative collective silences materialised where around 110 000 people joined a protest in December 2024 and spent 15 minutes in absolute silence on Slavija square in Belgrade. The period from January-March was marked by students and citizens walking across Serbia, crossing several hundreds of kilometres in something that bears resemblance to the endurance art performances of the 1970's.

The moment that *if walls could tell* arrived to Serbia, political or ideological dissensus was especially amplified, and by simply offering empty gallery walls, the work offered a particularly potent field for materialising this dissensus in writing, responding, and painting over different messages. It is interesting to analyse the choreography of civic movements triggered by this opportunity for communication – what is the importance of leaving a message, of replying to one, and what new, specific moments has this massive self-organisation of students and other citizens brought to the concept, the Čačak iteration of *if walls could tell*.

Bojan Djordjev (1977) is performance maker from Belgrade, educated in theatre directing and art theory in Belgrade at the Faculty of Drama/University of Arts and Amsterdam at DasArts. His artistic interests include contemporary playwrights and interdisciplinary research projects. His research deals with issues of artistic and cultural heritage of socialism in Yugoslavia and elsewhere, capitalist economy and finding artistic and theatrical public formats for Marxist thought. Apart from Belgrade, his works have been presented in Berlin, Brussels, Amsterdam, New York, Vienna, Graz, Shanghai, Zurich, Zagreb, Rijeka, Ljubljana. at festivals such as Europalia; ImpulsTanz, Steirischer Herbst, Mladi Levi, BITEF, Kondenz, Sterijino Pozorje, etc. He is a co-founder of TkH – Teorija koja hoda (Walking Theory) platform and *TkH Journal for Performing Arts Theory* – 2000-2017. With Siniša Ilić and Maja Mirković he co-curated *Scene work ahead* – Serbian exhibition for the Prague Quadrennial of Performance design and space 2019. With Siniša Ilić he co-curated *Gestures, signs of life* 31. Nadežda Petrović Memorial, a biennial of contemporary art in Čačak, Serbia in 2022; and co-curated *Liquid Becomings*, an ECF European Pavilion 2024 Belgrade/Rotterdam/Lisbon.

Even the Walls of Čačak Speak

Predrag Živković

Due to a series of social and political circumstances, the situation in which we originally planned and arranged for our institution to participate in this project changed radically over a relatively brief period by the time the Čačak episode of the “walls” actually took place. The broader changes in society inevitably affect how we relate to culture and art, underlining — now more than ever — their role as “one of the four central pillars of any society,” as one city council member in Čačak pointed out during a session held shortly after the program. What began as a carefully planned artistic intervention in public space — officially approved in our institution’s annual program, with the intention of inviting citizens into dialogue and participation — suddenly became a focal point that laid bare the full absurdity, banality, and unsustainability not only of the political system but also of the distorted value system that has, with varying levels of aggression, been imposed on this region for decades.

The white walls in Čačak did not stay white for long. Already during the official “opening” at the newly renovated Nadežda Petrović Square, the walls were quickly surrounded by a large group of young people — high school and university students, young artists, street-art creators (who have earned Čačak recognition beyond Serbia’s borders), middle-aged and elderly citizens, and random passersby. “Curating a new reality” — as one of the most striking initial messages read — began spontaneously. There were beautiful drawings, mini-murals, clever thoughts, love notes, and meaningless signatures — everything, really. Of course, those markings didn’t last long — they were quickly covered by new, more aggressive ones, in more intense colors. Some slogans, directly echoing those seen at protests across Serbia, began to appear, so of course, special crews were dispatched to swiftly paint them over. Football fans — or rather, hooligan groups commonly referred to as “fans,” such a “significant” subculture in Serbian society — even they showed up to, ironically, “speak” in written form. All of this unfolded under the watchful eyes of city officials — literally beneath the windows of the city hall, in front of the high school, with a massive “BLOCKADE” banner hanging from a balcony — at the very epicenter of the city and the recent wave of civic unrest.

After two days, we brought the walls into the gallery and hosted a thought-provoking and content-rich panel discussion. The audience was not large, but it was genuinely engaged and active. In a Serbia where conditions were “normal,” this might have been the main focus of the text. But reality dictates other priorities. Our institution has a long-standing tradition of stepping beyond the gallery space — opening up to the public and encouraging civic participation. Some perceive this as provocation, as desecration of public space, as a thorn in the side of the people, the authorities, and tradition itself — and respond accordingly: harshly, verbally, and sometimes physically. This time, however, there were no such incidents — no acts of vandalism or destruction, not even the usual online outrage on local portals or social media. What was far more intense and uncertain were the days leading up to the action itself. We consciously changed the originally planned location — because the current political moment simply could not be ignored. As an institution that has, since its founding, promoted and engaged with contemporary artistic practices, we responded in alignment with our principles and preserved our integrity. Only those who are even partially familiar with the wider social context in Serbia in recent months can fully grasp how significant that decision was. And how courageous.

Until the very last moment, informal and semi-secret pressures were exerted on the institution to prevent the program from taking place. The system, which strategically marginalizes relevant contemporary and especially socially engaged artistic and cultural production, attempting to reduce it to mere ‘creative industries’, while haughtily promoting a pseudo-national cultural model at all levels of governance, might, under ordinary circumstances, have even pretended to welcome such an artistic “extravaganza.” But under the conditions in which this project was unexpectedly realized, even the faintest hint of unfiltered, authentic, public expression was seen as a direct threat by the system. And that is true even in the cultural field — a domain into which this state continues to invest shamefully little. Still, no formal ban was issued and the program went ahead. The institution fulfilled its duty which is, incidentally, one of the key demands of the student and civic movement in Serbia. It may have taken on a responsibility that does not, by its nature, belong to it — but in a country where institutions are held captive, it redefined its role within the local community, defended the right to public space, and at least symbolically demonstrated that institutions can — and must — serve the citizens rather than a usurped state.

And so, the walls spoke in Čačak—and they did so at the right time, in the right place. The institution reached out to the citizens, and they responded, each in their own way. Painted over countless times, beneath layers of barely visible messages, one striking statement remained on each of the six wall surfaces. Stenciled in Cyrillic: CULTURE ≤ 1% OF THE BUDGET. Someone had the patience and forethought to suffer the kids and the football fans, and then leave their mark with intent and purpose. And if we truly want to keep doing this work — professionally, with the dedication that all of it really has some value—there is really no other way.

Predrag Živković is a curator and graduated film & tv producer and is employed as a curator, exhibition producer and assistant director at the Art Gallery “Nadežda Petrović”. Until 2012, he worked in various positions in media production (radio host, journalist, production manager, producer, head of the production department) at RTS and Regional Television Čačak and since 2006, he has been working on the project “Interaction” (International Student Film Camp) as an executive producer. He is the founder and president of the Center for Media Development “CineCult” Čačak. He is also a member of the Council of the International Animated Film Festival “Animanima”, the executive producer of the festival (2007/8), member of the Council of the Ambient&World Music Festival “Carousel”. Furthermore, he is a member of the Council of “Spring of Dis”, the Poetry Festival organized by the City Library “Vladislav Petković Dis” in Čačak. Živković is the initiator and curator of the biennial event “Sonja’s September” (2019-) and a member of the project team and program coordinator for the project “Čačak - Capital of Culture of Serbia 2023”. In 2023, he won the “Tori Janković Award” for his contribution to the decentralization of film art in Serbia. So far, he has curated and produced numerous exhibitions and participated in the production of over 60 documentaries, as a producer and executive producer.

Some Theses on Participatory Art in Relation to Misha Kuball's project *if walls could tell*

Jasmina Čubrilo

1. History:

The history of participatory art practices can be followed from the early efforts of the historical avant-garde to challenge and critically question the artistic hierarchies upholding the nineteenth century conceptualization of art as an autonomous institution invested with pure aesthetic value via the dissolution of boundaries between art and life and exploring ways to unify art and life.

"Painters have shown us the objects and the people placed before us. We shall henceforward put the spectator in the center of the painting. ... We would at any price re-enter into life." Umberto Boccioni¹

"It is time that art entered into life in an organized fashion," Alexander Rodchenko²
"Art, just like science and technology, is a method of organizing our shared life in general." Theo van Doesburg, El Lissitzky and Hans Richter³

Peter Burger limits the avant-garde's intentions toward unifying art and life by virtue of the readymade, chance, and montage, but these are far from the only techniques that can be seen as negating the purpose, mode of production, and mode of reception of art as an autonomous institution. The idea of putting "the spectator in the center of the painting" as well as those "multiple ways in which the futurists sought to interpellate and galvanize the masses, focusing particularly on their performative interpretation of late-nineteenth-century French and Italian crowd theory" (Christine Poggi),⁴ were also methods or forms of merging art and life. Readymade and participatory practices seem to be two sides of the same coin: if the readymade brings life into art through appropriated and repurposed objects, then agitating and activating the spectator/crowd brings life itself into the art realm. Encouraging audience interaction led the way for participatory art, from Dada, Situationism and Allan Kaprow's or Jean-Jacques Lebel's happenings to the present.

2. Present: *if walls could tell*

Participatory art practices reconfiguring the political in aesthetic form and "reframing a sense of community and mending the social bond and time that binds together practices, forms of visibility, and patterns of intelligibility" (Jacques Rancière),⁵ create spaces of encounter, dialogue, negation, confrontation, antagonism, and form some kind of community, mostly of a temporal nature. However, participatory art could create space for the communal "where success means to be recognized for working toward communal well-being and not for celebrated individual achievement, where art is produced not for the market but for the exploration and release of human creativity, where the goal of invention is not primarily to succeed in the market" (Walter D. Mignolo),⁶ fostering a communal praxis of living.

The empty, neutral white 'walls' of the Čačak edition of Misha Kuball's project *if walls could tell* were transformed by the intervention of the citizens of the Serbian city into a multi-layered reflection and statement on the complex socio-political and ideological turmoil that characterized Serbia during a period of almost seven months of protests. The participants did not establish a new community distinct from existing ones, which were already divided by differing political viewpoints and responses to the tragic collapse of the canopy at the recently renovated railway station facility in Novi Sad (November 2024). Therefore, the visually dense walls of Kuball's installation became part of a broader network of indexes that circulate through (counter-)public spheres modeled by participatory culture. The project in this particular case serves not so much as an argument for the power of art in engaging with and responding to significant moments of social change and unrest. On the contrary, it is closer to emphasizing the importance of collective efforts and the shared experience of direct participation, negotiation, creativity, and expression within a politically and ideologically divided community.

Notes

- 1 Umberto Boccioni, "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting," 1910, <https://www.arthistoryproject.com/artists/umberto-boccioni/technical-manifesto-of-futurist-painting/>, accessed on June, 21st, 2025.
- 2 Alexander Rodchenko, "Slogans," in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2003), 340.
- 3 Theo van Doesburg, El Lissitzky, and Hans Richter, "Declaration of the International Fraction of Constructivists of the First International Congress of Progressive Artists," in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2003), 315.
- 4 Christine Poggi, "Folla/Follia: Futurism and the Crowd," *Critical Inquiry* 28, Number 3 (Spring 2002): 709-711, <https://doi.org/10.1086/343236>
- 5 Jacques Rancière, "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics," in *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Beth Hinderliter, Vered Maimon, Jaleh Mansoor, and Seth McCormick (Duke University Press, 2009), 37.
- 6 Walter D. Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations* (Duke University Press, 2021), 347.

Jasmina Čubrilo (PhD, Serbia) is an art historian based in Belgrade. She works as a Professor of Modern Art History focussing on concepts and phenomena in modern, postmodern, and contemporary art within the avant-garde and new media art movements. In addition to articles, essays, scholarly chapters and research papers published in national and international publications (*Handbook of International Futurism*, ed. Gunter Berghaus, DeGryter, 2018; *Making Art History in Europe After 1945*, eds. de Haro García, Mayayo & Carrillo, Routledge, 2020; *Hot Art, Cold War – Southern and Eastern European Writing on American Art 1945-1990*, eds. Hopkins & Boyd Whyte, Routledge, 2021; *Centropa, Ethno-anthropological problems*, Art&Media Journal, Journal of Modern Art History Department), she is also the author of several books, including *Belgrade Art Scene - the Nineties*, Belgrade 1998; *Zora Petrović*, Belgrade 2011; *Jelica Radovanović i Dejan Anđelković: symp-tom.dj*, Belgrade 2011; *Bojan Bem: Media Repositioning of the Image*, Belgrade 2016; *On Scale: Monumentalizing the Miniature*, Belgrade 2019; *Jovan Kratochvil: A Study of a Model of Yugoslav Modernism*, Belgrade 2021.

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The central focus of this issue is based on a proposition by Mischa Kuball via the idea of how a possible new position of the artist as catalyst, and concurrently the curator as mediator, could emerge in an art-world saturated with celebrity culture where art institutions become landscapes of power and politics instead of contact zones and spaces for negotiation and exchange. As simple as it was, the idea of placing blank white walls in public spaces of different cities, symbolically referring to the concept of a gallery or museum's white cube gives free access to the citizens to make their imprints on these walls and thus exercise their right to publicly comment on the issues that concern them.

Together, the contributions raise questions about the role of cultural institutions at the semi-periphery of Europe, the limits and possibilities of participatory art, and the capacity of shared public space to build or repair social bonds in societies marked by fragility, contestation, and ongoing civic unrest.

The project unfolded across seven cities — Sarajevo, Bucharest, Skopje, Chişinău, Ljubljana, Kraljevica, and Čačak.