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## THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF ART IN THE PUBLIC SPACE<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

The public space and the art within it have taken different forms and functions in history, namely changing from being an agora, to present-day so-called hybrid forms. The resulting state of forms and functions of art in the public space depends on several determinants, including freedom and restrictions concerning the public space. While under totalitarian regimes priorities and restrictions prevail, after the fall of totalitarian regimes almost unlimited freedom comes into being. Consequently, questions arise regarding who makes decisions on the forms of art placed in the public space, and on what grounds such decisions are made. In our article, in taking the example of one city we are looking for the answers to questions whether and how it is possible to map the art in the public urban space, as well as who, and on what grounds, makes decisions regarding expressions of art in the public space. Methodologically, we have based our research on the identification and analysis of relevant documents of cultural policy related to a given place and on interviews with a chosen relevant expert who is involved in the public space.

Key words: public space, art, culture, cultural policy

### CITY AND THE ART

The public space and the art within it have taken different forms and functions in history, namely changing from being an agora, to the present-day so-called hybrid forms. In ancient times, the agora, considered to be the

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oldest form of public space, served as a foundation of democracy: "Artistic objects were an integral part of a public space and they represented an important political, social and religious function" (Blažek, 1997, p. 3). Monuments with religious themes served as an indicator of the proper way of life for the common people, the Forum Romanum being a very similar case. Although in the Middle Ages the main public space remained the square, gradually, its function changed. The square became both a market place and a place for festivities and spectacles, where fountains, sculptures, chapels or loggia, served as a symbolic representation. It came to incorporate unique and precious artwork to be presented and proudly displayed to merchants and travellers. Cities were the dominion of mercantile centres and symbols of prestige. In some cases, as, for example, in Siena, the square had become a true open-air museum (Guidoni, 1998). The renaissance city was planned following the principles of order and unity resulting from a reborn interest in the classical ideas of Greece and Rome (Cabaniillas Whitaker, 2005, p. 563). Moreover, as their military functions were strengthened, squares were placed under careful political control. These tendencies continued even later, as articulated by Mumford, when absolutist defiles of power were projected into city, building, or artistic decorations (1963).

Historically, art in cities was the fruit of the patronage of the urban ruling class. As mentioned by Kirby, "the concentration of artistic activity in large cities again depended on an urban elite that drew upon the ruling class and the church, and whose patronage supported and defined what Adorno termed a 'high culture'" (2005, p. 88). Commemorative and educational sculptures were frequently freely exhibited in the public space after the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, art became a symbol of competition within different nations: "It became the norm to collect artefacts from one's colonies and to place them in new museums that showcased economic power and global reach" (ibid.). Despite the function of upholding political supremacy, it had also a significant role in raising the public interest in art by its visibility and display. On the other hand, Sitte confronts the changes in physical form with changes in sociopolitical and cultural development from the point of view of urban development. The author accurately portrayed the spirit of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when he observed that: "In our public life many things have inevitably changed, and many ancient forms lost their former significance," continuing that "We cannot change the fact that marketplaces are increasingly withdrawing from the square

and are closing down into non-artistic commercial buildings or being replaced by home delivery” (2012, p. 71). He also points to the transformation of the significance of artistic pieces, as in the case of public fountains, which maintain a merely decorative value, as progress has taken away their original purpose. This change also applies to works of art that were increasingly leaving streets and squares to be enclosed within the shackles of museums, while “at the same time the bustle of folk processions, of folklore and carnivals, of church processions and theatre productions in urban space disappeared” (ibid.). The public space gradually lost its function of being a platform for public life. As life disappeared from public spaces, they lost their unique significance while the way of life became unfavourable to the artistic representation of urban areas. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the redesign of urban spaces took place with the aim of showcasing some elements despite others that needed to be hidden, as, for example, the “creation of elaborate facades could hide the poorest districts” (Kirby, 2005, p. 88).

The 20<sup>th</sup> century is associated with the arrival of the automobile, a development that radically changed the forms of cities and their public spaces, causing the necessity of an elaborate transformation of entire cities. Urban spaces unquestionably changed from being pedestrian zones of “a human scale” to long distance arterial roads. As cities expand and the distances increase, the human scale disappears from them. In urbanism and urban planning in late 1950s, a new wave called functionalism came into being. This not only completely changed the physical form of cities, now divided into different zones according to their function, but also altered the system of people’s everyday activities as they took place in different urban zones.

As for art in the public space, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, various movements that supported idea of incorporating contemporary art in the public space were formed. In developed countries, mainly in North America and Western Europe, on the one hand, the art support programmes such as Percent for Art, or art councils came into operation. Governments gradually began to understand that art needs to be supported and started to announce open calls for artists, mainly for visual artists. However the artists themselves felt also the need to get out of the closed world of galleries and went into the open air in order to engage the wider public by focusing on social or political issues. In other words, the regulation of the public space and the art in it depended on various actors,

including local governments and the public sphere, private customers, as well as the artists themselves.

## CITIES AND ART BEFORE AND AFTER THE COMMUNIST REGIME

However, the situation was quite different in Central and Eastern Europe under communist regimes. Instead of private or local government, state ownership prevailed. As a consequence, ideological and political rules determined economic, social and cultural activities, not excluding those occurring in the public space. In fact, the public space was the main area where the state's power and control could exist. The term "public space" gained a negative connotation under totalitarian regimes. The concept of common or public was associated with the regime-state police, opportunism, cowardice, or selfishness (Hlaváček, 1997). The political environment did not allow the public to participate in the active administration of public matters, which was reserved exclusively for the members of the Communist Party and for those who collaborated with them. The whole process of decision-making and control was carried out at the central level of the state. Citizens had little or no possibility of freedom or democracy in public matters.

What was the purpose and function of art under a totalitarian regime? Who was making decisions about art in the public space? The same approach of centralised management was applied to art. Artistic creation and its influence on society, was highly controlled. Art was displayed in the public space mostly thanks to the 4% law, which imposed an obligation to invest a certain percentage of the budget of public buildings in the creation of artworks. Even if there was some space for artistic freedom, art was centrally managed and decided according to the prevailing political will. This art was called the "official scene". As a consequence, however, an unofficial art scene began to form. This existed, for example, in the form of "action art", in Slovak the so-called "akčné umenie".<sup>3</sup> This was mostly created by artists in an intimate environment, often in natural surroundings and without viewers. There was another category of art that preserved

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the most outstanding artists of this artistic production are Vladimír Popovič, Milan Adamčiak, Róbert Cyprich or Alex Mlanarčík.

some trait of freedom, the so-called grey zone. Although this was usually high-quality art that did not really follow political goals, at the same time it was not too “dangerous” for the regime. In any case, it rarely ended up in the main square of a city centre. More often it existed in the public areas of a borough, or in other peripheral parts of cities (Čarná, 2007). In contrast, historical and other centres used to be a showcase of pro-regime values and ideology. The concern that Hannah Arendt formulated states, that “the common world disappears if it is seen only from one point of view. This world only exists in many perspectives” (1958, p. 198). This may also be extended and understood in context of this topic and points to the threats of a common world, and also of a public space “if it is the only perspective dictated by any totalitarian regime . . .”, as Kratochvíl states (2015, p. 14).

Today, almost unlimited freedom has come into being. In post-socialist cities, the redesign of technical infrastructure and the urban landscape was needed. The return of market mechanisms had a most decisive political and economic impact on the transformation of the urban space. This was followed by many other processes which mainly resulted in the functional modification of the centres of cities: what before had held administrative and political functions, later assumed a commercial purpose (Weclawowicz, 2005, p. 533). Private self-government and local interest groups started to make an impact and take over control. The decision-making process was gradually divided among different actors and passed from central to local level. Except for various advantages, this has also resulted in an unplanned increase of street markets, the appropriation of the public space and problems in planning regulations. If we look around us, we see that the territory of the public space is marked by a distorted logic, the logic of the value of exchange rather than the value of use. Morello treats the logic where the public space is used as an object of the market. Those areas that have not yet been laid with concrete and provide an immediate opportunity for commercialisation, i.e. those intended for public use, have been systematically reduced in size or otherwise neglected. On the other hand, market areas (areas for private construction) have always been oversized and wildly exploited (Morello, 1986, p. 10). These marketing and commercial approaches, as well as decisions and policy makers, also have an impact on art in the public space.

What is the situation of art in the public space today? The situation has moderately changed after the fall of communist regimes. As stated below by Weclawowicz, in the context of art:

the reassessment of urban space has caused the replacement of communist symbols by historic and national symbols. The former communist street names have been replaced by the pre-war names. The same has happened with the monuments (2005, p. 534).

Today, we can recognise many forms and many functions of art in the public space, while the boundaries between them are often blurred. The *Encyclopedia of art* understands the term “public art” as “any work of art which is designed for and sited in a space accessible to the general public, from a public square to a wall inside a building open to the public” (Public art, n.d.). Regarding its form, this ranges from visual art – statues, monuments, ceramics installations, graffiti, street art – to concerts, theatres, performances and happenings, as well as to video-art, relational art, site-specific art, community projects, guerrilla art, action art, and many more. Therefore, perhaps the situation can be also described as today art is hard to define by genres and instead we are facing many hybrid forms crossing over the genres (that can be possibly a result of postmodernism). The following section of this article deals with this same issue.

Based on one case study on the Slovak city of Nitra, we want to examine the following: to explore and analyse how one may describe the situation of art in the public space; mainly, to identify its state, forms and trends; how it has changed lately; as well as who makes decisions on expressions of art in the public space, and on what grounds they are made. Methodologically, we have based our research on a semi-structured interview conducted with Slávka Civaňová, a chosen relevant expert who has been active and involved in the public space. At the *Divadelná Nitra* international theatre festival, she was the head of an accompanying programme which took place mainly in the urban public space of Nitra. The interview is completed with the analysis of cultural policy documents and other relevant texts. The festival is held in the city of Nitra, which is the fifth largest city in Slovakia, with approximately 80,000 inhabitants. It is the seat of the Nitra municipality, the Nitra District and the Nitra Region. It has played a very important role in the history of the Slavs, having been the seat of Prince Pribina, the ruler of the principality of Nitra. Thus, the city has a rich cultural and historical tradition. Today, Nitra hosts several cultural and artistic events of local origin, as well as those of foreign artists or organisations, on which we will focus in this research.

## ART IN THE STREETS OF NITRA

According to Slávka Cíváňová, by art in the public space we understand anything that arises from the engagement of the artist in the public space and that interacts with an audience. This does not refer just to visual art, but also to installations, works, and live interactions with a performative character. Very important aspects include interaction and communication with the environment in which the artwork is located. This must always be based on some historical context, tradition, or community. The goal is to either mediate the information, to point at something, or to induce the interest or engagement of the recipient (Cíváňová, 2017). In a concrete sociocultural context, art should discuss current issues, draw attention to them, or attempt to solve them through the artworks themselves. The work of artists reflects the context of their time, culturally, religiously and socially. Specifically, in the public place, the role of artists should be to reach out and to communicate with the recipient in a different manner. This concerns complete new forms of how to engage the viewer in the artist's work or subject. By stepping out of the institution and entering an open space, the recipient may be anybody, while the function is to communicate with the viewer outside an official institution, and surprise him or her. The feedback reactions can be completely different from those expected. As the recipient may be anyone, the artist must be aware that he or she may have any reaction to it. Artists must consider, for instance, that their work of art may even not survive until the morning. Cíváňová is convinced, that art should be engaging, particularly, in a public space. She explains that "in a space where you have a great stream of different visual elements, media, advertisements, you do not want to make some dull exhibition on strings among the trees. When you want people to get involved, you have to be much more active on the subject" (ibid.).

Looking at the reality of art in the public space in Nitra, and, generally speaking, in Slovakia, the theatre has developed mainly more traditional forms which are more closed, more conventional. The transition into innovative alternative theatres is lacking. As even a cultural event such as a happening is often prepared and directed in advance, there is little space for chance, little interaction with the viewer. Compared with other European countries, Slovakia is more conservative. While Prague in the Czech Republic is an incubator for innovative theatre, and also for so-called

immersive theatre, we cannot say the same about any Slovak city. Nevertheless, this has changed in recent years.

There have been two fundamental innovations. The most obvious change in recent years is the use of New Media. Although this trend has also hit Nitra, these are changes that are related to more widespread changes in technology and communication.

The artists also work with video art, with projections, they are looking for various interactive elements where the recipient can control the sounds or moves through his interaction. In the past few years, the direction of *Divadelná Nitra* festival is also moving towards having a new media character (ibid.).

The second change regards a tendency of artists to turn to local communities and to create projects which deal with themes that are of interest to it. These are so-called community-engaged works that are being created. On the other hand, what could be found in the urban area, beforehand were usually only installations in the public space, namely performance activities or dance performances that interacted with a random passers-by and viewers, but they did not use any unusual elements. These were meant to work only with a random viewer.

## WHAT IS HAPPENING IN NITRA?

From the point of view of an expert, what could be considered to have been an important event in the public space during the last few months? In reply, Cíváňová pointed out an event named *Closing the bookstore*. A cult bookstore called “Knihkupectvo a antikvariát pod Vříškom” (Rozhovor: Kultové Knihkupectvo, 2017) was forced to close after 27 years and give in to the pressure of developers. Although this was a bookstore that had regularly organised various cultural events, both inside the store and outside in the street, its hands were tied as the City Council decided to sell the building. The closing-down event saw the taking place of a concert and lectures about how often such independent initiatives and activities must end. Therefore, “paradoxically, a good event was accompanying a sad one” (Cíváňová, 2017).

Another activity which is worth mentioning is the Hidepark centre, where sport, culture, art, ecology and open-minded people have



come together. More specifically, this is a space on the outskirts of the city, where different activities take place, although they are community rather than art-focused. It includes “a community garden, a pump track, u-ramp, a grill, a fireplace, a petanque terrain, a parkour course, a stage, a kitchenette and a base for volunteers. In addition, every summer we prepare a programme of alternative culture, sport and ecology at HidePark” (O Hideparku, n.d.) – state the organisers.

On the other hand, a broad range of classic street art or “street attractions” organised by the City Council takes place. These events are very mainstream, are subjected to the audience’s taste, and always follow the same pattern. Rarely is there a really good art project. The exceptions are only few, as, for example, the project *Nitra, dear Nitra* that has the ambition to become a well-regarded event that depicts the history of city (Nitra, milá Nitra, 2017). It seems that what is being produced by the city or the region is mostly of lower quality, or is rather aimed at the mainstream viewer and offers an approach of very little innovation. At the same time, cultural and artistic initiatives from the third sector usually prefer the opposite way of “practicing the craft”.

One related issue that the city is struggling with is the more widespread problem of life being drained from the city centre. Since the opening of the Mlyny Shopping Mall, the public space of the city has been empty, with only a few events being held that do not even attract many people. This is more apparent in Nitra than in other cities as the Mlyny mall is in the very centre of the city. As all public life is being concentrated in Mlyny, very often cultural institutions also make their presentations or run an event in this mall as they know that they will find random viewers there. Indeed, in less than ten years, it has changed the face of the city visibly. As a reaction, the local city council has attempted to make something happen in the city itself. With the aim of solving this long-term problem of reviving the pedestrian zone in the centre, the local government authorities issued a decree for restaurants and bars which states that if they regularly organise live music or concerts, they will not have to pay taxes. By the end of the year, everyone who had a terrace had to pay a rent. Now, they will have it free of charge, if once in a while they organise some spectacle that has the potential to attract people. However, as correctly Cíváňová recalls, “it is worth considering and clarifying what we understand by art in the public space” (Cíváňová, 2017), as well as what kind of art we want to consume in our urban space. This also concerns the polemic regarding

what we understand as art in the public space. As a contrast, we can name the example to which Ilona Németh refers, an artist who expresses her opinion through her artistic creations and interventions and considers it important to be a conscious citizen.<sup>4</sup> Cíváňová is also of the same opinion when she states: “It is not only concerts or street theatre, but I understand it as an event that has come from the environment and has reacted to something” (ibid.).

### THE CELL AND THE PEDESTAL AS A SUBSTITUTE, OR WHAT IS MISSING?

Nitra is unquestionably missing a platform where top Slovak contemporary artists could present their work in the public space. Although one possible option could be the establishment of a unique and great gallery, its activities rarely come out of its own space: “Thus, contemporary art in the public space is totally left out, in any form – from events in which different installations could arise, not to mention performing acts” (ibid.). However, there have been several attempts, such as project entitled *The Cell* (in Slovak, *Bunka*) carried out by one particular person that also brought contemporary artists to the city and who worked in the public space. The organisers wanted to open up this location to “exhibitions, workshops, concerts, performances, audio-visual presentations – film and video art screenings that enrich local cultural events with new values” (Projekt Bunka, n.d.). The chosen topics were supposed to help one find a city identity. *Bunka* was important in “selecting what is characteristic of the site, searching for and linking meaningful cultural activities, using and contributing to their potential creative superstructure” (ibid.). In addition, the artists dealt with urgent questions regarding architecture and art in the city, among other things.

Another project called *The Pedestal Outdoor Gallery* (in Slovak, *Podstavec Outdoor Gallery*) was the platform for an exhibition space just next to the Mlyny Shopping Mall, where installations, the display of objects, and live events were supposed to be held (Lehotský, 2011). One of the events

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<sup>4</sup> Ilona Németh is one of Slovakia’s most outstanding contemporary visual artists and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts.

called *Object Guarded by a Dog* was a case of a truly bizarre exhibition where empty objects were guarded by dogs. This was an expression of the dissatisfaction of the artistic community with the politicisation of cultural institutions, which politicians had sought to turn into their own promotional centres, entertainment centres or showcases of their own values and political preferences. Although other similar events and exhibitions took place at that particular location, these projects had only a temporary duration. As Cíváňová also points out: “generally, there is a lack of a platform for contemporary art. If a person who organises it leaves the city, or abandons the activity, the whole thing disappears” (Cíváňová, 2017). Therefore, the essential element that has an impact on art in the public space are particular artists and organisers themselves, as “it is all about the people” (ibid.).

## WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND BARRIERS OF ART IN PUBLIC SPACE?

In regional areas such as Nitra there are very few people engaged in art in the public space compared with, for example, Bratislava. According to Cíváňová, in the above-mentioned situation the city should support and highlight these activities. A system of policies at the municipal and regional government level should be set up in order to create conditions for these actors. However, as cultural policy at the municipal and regional government level does not exist in the sense that “we understand it as a priority and its necessity”, as the public administration prefers activities, street events or concerts organised for the masses that are not allowed to draw attention to faults or errors. This lack of cultural policy and financing from the city or region is supplanted by the significant personal commitment of individuals or organisations from non-established culture or, in other words, the bottom-up approach towards culture. Moreover, as previously mentioned, this often depends on particular people, as, for example, in the initiative *This is art, too* where several objects in Nitra<sup>5</sup> were marked with a special sign – “*This is art, too* project” (This is art, too, n.d.). Therefore, it is necessary that people who already work in this field should have

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<sup>5</sup> Within the objects were also the statues of Tibor Bártfay (very important local artist with national impact). The initiative helped to restore his precious representations.

the possibility to have somebody at the municipal government level who would be aware of the fundamental role of their efforts and results, and who would appreciate it as a niche area. The artists should be given the space in order to have the possibility to work, as Cíváňová states, “because if not, the tendency of an exodus of actively involved persons will continue” (2017).

On the other hand, the city of Nitra is willing to support art in the public space, even if this is financially demanding and performed in an innovative contemporary way, provided that the subject of the artwork is of their own interest. One such area that attracts the attention and grants of the local government administration is the subject of the historical period of Great Moravia. During the *Nitra, dear Nitra* project, mapping art and video art was performed. This video-mapping projection was called the *Great Moravian Astronomical Clock* (Letko, 2014). Cíváňová, who collaborated on the project, adds:

We projected a large astronomical clock on the wall of the Ponitrian Museum, where Great Moravians appeared. It had its story, it had its live, directed part, but much of it was based on mapping and video art. Although it was very challenging financially, the city wanted to do this (2017).

Otherwise, local government shows little or no concern. For example, *The Lantern Parade* (quite a big and popular event) failed, also due to fact that support from the city was lacking. After one performance when a performer was injured, the organisers asked the city to ensure the participants’ safety. Regrettably, as the city did not want to collaborate, the programme had to be stopped as it was revealed to be dangerous. Thus, the city should also provide a lot of support in terms of safety, security, transport management and logistics. Moreover, subsidies on their own are not the solution – it is important to have people involved and such individuals can only be found in schools.

## CONCLUSION

While the communist regime represented the main obstacle to art in the public space in terms of central management, along with the impossibility to work for artists who were not in the central registers and did not

follow the pro-regime rules, after the fall of the regime one can perceive the progressive opening of society at various levels. Moreover, with the change of political climate, other protagonists became a part of society. The government has lost its exclusive ownership with the private sector and civil society, in terms of non-profit organisation, also taking part in public life. Although the contemporary situation in Nitra regarding art represented and supported by the region and city is quite conservative, there have been several attempts by other sectors to get closer to the trend of contemporary art in the public space. However, these attempts are often sabotaged by municipal and regional authorities. Therefore, often instead of the authorities providing proactive participation in organising such endeavours, they are not interested in either financial or material support of the activities of non-profit cultural organisations or individuals, whose enthusiasm and dedication is fragile and can be easily disrupted. Thus, the acquired freedom seems not to be making full use of its potential.

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