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THE RIGHT TO THE CITY: RECLAIMING THE URBAN LANDSCAPE BY ART AND ACTIVISM

The survival and extension of public space is a political question.

[...] it is the question that lies at the heart of democracy.

- Claude Lefort, "Human Rights and the Welfare State"

Introduction

As a space available - at least nominally - for all citizens to enjoy and use, public space is the location where social identity is formed and represented, the stage where social practices take place, and in its broader meaning of the "public sphere" it is where "the public" gets organized, represented, and imagined. Ideally conceived as a place of unmediated interaction and political discourse between private individuals, it is at the same time also a space of exclusion and erasure, a space not just for social encounters but for political protest too, a site of domination as well as resistance. Being a source of legitimacy for various groups in society, it is always both a site for and a source of conflict.

Drawing on insights from major theorists of public space, this paper will explore the ethno-national divisions in the city of Skopje, Macedonia. As a site of intersection of numerous ethnicities, religions and cultures, Skopje is a deeply divided city along ethnic and religious lines. These divisions even manifest themselves in physical terms, with the predominantly ethnic Macedonian and Christian Orthodox population located in one part of the city, and the ethnic Albanian and Muslim in another, divided by a river that runs through the center of the city and serving as a visible border between the two communities. This gap has even widened in the wake of the 2001 inter-ethnic conflict in Macedonia.

A number of contemporary Macedonian artists working with/in public space, including the author of this paper, have centered their practices around ways of addressing and overcoming the invisible borders created in the city. This paper will focus on several examples of creative reuse,

artistic conversion and social re-writing of the urban landscape, in an effort to create a city which is inclusive and representative of all.

Public Space: Definition and Functions

Public space is a highly complex and multifaceted notion that covers under one term a wide variety of social locations, ranging from the street to the Internet, from the park to the media, from the neighborhood to global institutions and international markets. As such, it touches upon many disciplines, including geography, architecture, history, political economy, urbanism, anthropology, etc. Public space is commonly defined as a place (or space) created and maintained by public authority, and accessible to all citizens for their use and enjoyment. From the earliest notions of public space dating back to Greek antiquity, public space is almost always urban space. This is reflected in many contemporary theoretical deliberations of public space, where cities remain the focus of analysis.

The characteristics of public space can be summed up in the following way:

- It is defined by a process of exclusion (by race, gender, class, sexuality, age, disability)
- It is structured and delimited by law (and is becoming increasingly regulated and policed)
- Represents a ground for political action (site of protest for the labor movement, women's rights, sexual liberation, racial equality)
- Acts as ceremonial staging grounds for the state to display its power
- Serves as a gathering place, a space of sociality.¹

This dialectics of access and exclusion, law and custom, power and protest is one of the defining features of public space. Public space is constantly produced through "a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, order and disorder, rationality and irrationality, violence and peaceful dissent".²

Even though public space is generally conceived as more or less open to public participation, it is not free of regulation. On the contrary, regulation and control are one of its key features: it is defined by the "rules of access, source and nature of control over entry to a space, individual and collective behavior sanctioned in specific spaces, and rules of use".³ Through this dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, by granting access to certain social groups and depriving others, thus rendering them invisible, public space constructs "the public".

¹ Don Mitchell and Lynn A. Staeheli, 'Clean and Safe? Property Redevelopment, Public Space, and Homelessness in Downtown San Diego' in Setha Low and Neil Smith (eds), *The Politics of Public Space*, New York: Routledge, 2006, 144.

² Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, 51.

³ Smith and Low, 'Introduction: The imperative of public space', 3.

It would be useful here to mention Henri Lefebvre's distinction in the 'Production of Space'⁴ between representational space (appropriated, lived space, space-in-use), spatial practices (everyday activities of reclaiming and populating space, determining its segments, and territorialization of needs and desires within that space), and representations of space (planned, controlled, ordered space) "passively experienced" by its users. Public spaces often start as representations of space (a square, a park are materialized projections of the spatial visions of urban planners, scientists and social engineers), but through their use people appropriate them, socially produce them into representational space (i.e. symbolic spaces directly experienced through images and symbols).

As space for representation, public space is of crucial importance. For a world defined exclusively by private property necessarily precludes any existence of a public sphere which would be inclusive and broadly representative of a variety of different publics. Public space is the space where individuals see and are seen by others as they engage in public affairs and is thus a necessary precondition for "public freedom" (Hannah Arendt). As an arena of political debate and participation, the public sphere is fundamental to democratic governance. It is the arena where the public organizes itself, formulates public opinion, and expresses its interests and desires in relation to the government. According to the US Supreme Court (*Lloyd Corp v. Tanner*, 1972), the right to free speech only extends to activity on public not private property.⁵ Focused on rational critical argumentation and on the exercise of reason, in Habermas' model the quality of the public sphere and its contribution to democracy depend on two factors: the quality of discourse (rational reasoning and argumentation), as well as on the quantity of citizen participation (level of involvement in public affairs).⁶ In fact, it is the gradual expansion of the public sphere to ensure greater inclusivity that Habermas points to as one of the factors that are detrimental to the quality of discourse. In the expansion of access, the form of participation gets "fatally altered".⁷ The joint critical activity of debate and public discourse is replaced by passive consumption of culture accompanied by "apolitical sociability". It can be said that Habermas here favors the first element over the second, i.e. rational critical debate over participation. The central tenet of Habermas' ideal – a power-free public sphere – is the idea of *consensus*, rationally and freely attained among participants in the public sphere. However, in her discussion on the kind of public sphere required by a truly democratic society, Chantal Mouffe criticizes the privileging of consensus over confrontation among diverse democratic political identities. Not only does every consensus exist as a "temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and... always entails some form of exclusion"⁸, but also

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 39.

⁵ Margaret Kohn, *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

⁶ See Craig Calhoun, "Introduction" in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT, 1996), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁸ Chantal Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 104.

the project of arriving at a consensus without exclusion implies “the eradication of the political”⁹ and “displacement of politics by morality and law”¹⁰:

“When a society lacks a dynamic democratic life with a real confrontation among a diversity of democratic political identities, the terrain is laid for other forms of identification to take their place, identification of an ethnic, religious, or nationalist nature which lead to the emergence of antagonisms that cannot be managed by the democratic process.”¹¹

For Mouffe, antagonism is inherent in human relations and is at the heart of the political realm. Arguing that the tendency for consensus and the avoiding of confrontation leads to apathy and lack of political participation, Mouffe underlines the “integrative role” played by conflict in modern society and that consensus must be accompanied by dissent. While there should be consensus on the institutions which are constitutive of democracy and on the values that underlie any form of political association, “there will always be disagreement concerning the meaning of those values and the way they should be implemented.”¹² Instead of consensus, Mouffe argues for the radical democratic model of “agonistic pluralism”, where all antagonisms could be expressed and the role of power relations in society is acknowledged, along with the ever present possibility of antagonism.

Public spaces are sites of interaction and encounter (the street, the square, the park) as well as places of interchange and communication. As spaces for popular use and areas shared by all citizens, public spaces are the primary source of local identity. Public space is a space for representation, where heterogeneous social groups openly assert their identity. But, since it is also by definition a space of exclusion, this representation (and the right to it) has to be continuously reasserted. It is in public spaces that political movements become visible - they represent themselves to a larger audience not only to attract supporters but also to reclaim visibility because only by becoming visible do they stand a chance to be countered as legitimate members of society. That’s why the right to mass in public space has always been one of the key demands of political movements. It is public space where political dissent becomes visible and gains momentum, as well as is regulated and policed. “By claiming space in public, by creating public spaces, social groups themselves become public”¹³, points Mitchell, arguing that public space should always be viewed in close relation to movements for social justice. It is the struggle for rights that produces public space. Public space is space where excluded groups rise up to demand legitimacy within the public, i.e. it is a deeply political space.

⁹ Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁰ Chantal Mouffe, “Which Public Sphere for a Democratic Society”, *Theoria* (June 2002): 56.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 56.

¹² Ibid., p.58.

¹³ Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, 129.

Reclaiming symbolic public space: the case of Skopje

This highly contested nature of public space is all the more evident in cities which are deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines, with different social groups vying for representation in public space. Macedonia's capital Skopje is one such example, with its population divided into two distinct worlds through language, alphabet, religion, as well as values, political representation, and systems of information and organization. Ethnic Macedonians, who are mostly Orthodox Christians, and speak Macedonian, a Slavic language, are the largest ethnic group in the city, with 66.75% of the population. They are followed by ethnic Albanians, with 20.49% of the total population, the majority of whom are Muslim and speak Albanian, an independent branch in the Indo-European language family which is also the official language in neighboring Albania and Kosovo. Other ethnic groups in the city include: Roma (4.63%), Serbs (2.82%), Turks (1.70%), Bosniaks (1.50%), etc.¹⁴ Their segregation in the urban space of Skopje is both facilitated and made visible by the river Vardar, stretching as a natural and historical border line from one end of the city to the other, dividing the urban center of Skopje into two distinct municipalities: the predominantly ethnic Albanian Municipality of Čair on the north bank, which includes the Old Town with its Ottoman style buildings and numerous mosques, a reminder of the five-century long presence of the Ottoman Empire in this part of Europe, and Municipality Centar on the south bank of the river, with its high-rises and shopping malls.

Rooted in its history as a meeting point between the East and the West, Skopje's urban segmentation and resulting segregation was only furthered by the 1963 earthquake that destroyed seventy percent of the city, and the ensuing urban redevelopment. The post-quake master plan for the rebuilding of Skopje centered on two main ideas: using the opportunity to rationalize the overall structure of the city and creating a completely new city center, as the core of the concept of Skopje as an "open city". The plan proposed building prefabricated one-storey and high-rise buildings in order to meet the urgent need for housing in the wake of the earthquake as well as the expected growth of population and rise of living standards. But the implementation of the plan didn't go smoothly, as the planners had to confront with the highly complex social realities of the multilayered city with its diverse population, which ultimately led to the failure of the planned homogenization of the population through its housing types. Indeed, it can be said that the "planning of the 1960s and the way it was implemented intensified the segregation of the ethnic groups"¹⁵, as did the plan of the new city center, masterminded by the famed Japanese structuralist architect Kenzo Tange. In Tange's vision for Skopje, his first major urban project in the West, the core element was the "nucleus", a distinct zone along the river banks enhanced with numerous public functions (concert hall, TV station, university and city administration on the northern/left bank, and the Government, shopping centre, telecommunications and central post office on the southern/right bank), dominated by two central squares on each side of the river. This area was to turn the natural and historical

¹⁴ [Government of the Republic of Macedonia. "2002 census results"](#). stat.gov.mk. Retrieved 2010-01-30.

¹⁵ Mijalkovic and Urbanek, *Skopje – The World's Bastard: Architecture of the Divided City*, 10.

boundary of the river into a space for collective use and unity. A City Wall of high-density slab-block housing was planned to enclose the core of the city, both the old and the new one. However, the only partially realized nucleus never became the intended unifying core - but rather an urban void. Even today it is still “a buffer zone in the divided city, no one’s and everyone’s non-place.”¹⁶

With Macedonia’s independence after the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, and the denial of its ethnic identity by the neighboring countries, the new state reached back into its long history for symbols and signs to construct its collective cultural narrative and a new, distinct identity. In this, it relied strongly on rediscovered Christianity, building a large number of new Orthodox churches and crosses all around the country. This included raising a 66-meter high Millennium Cross on top of Mount Vodno, overlooking Skopje (built from 2002-2009), in the wake of the 2001 inter-ethnic conflict which threatened to engulf the country in a full-scale civil war. The Albanian community employed similar symbolic strategies of forging collective identity, erecting new mosques and minarets to define new borders and territories.

Macedonian artists have produced a number of projects focused on artist interventions in this divided public space in order to transform it from a place of seclusion into a place of inclusion with messages other than those emanating from the centres of power, capital, and privilege. The media used ranged from graffiti and tagging, to political messages, billboards, to installations, video, to murals, sculptures and many other forms. The approach taken by all these art projects is the one Michel de Certeau calls a ‘tactic’. Without a place of its own, a tactic operates in isolated actions, takes advantage of opportunities and depends on them, reacting immediately. Tactics are characterized by mobility, speed, and smaller goals. De Certeau likens it to poaching: “It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers... It creates surprises in them... In short, a tactic is an art of the weak”¹⁷. Here I will focus on two such recent projects.

In his ongoing project *Territories* (2004-), Igor Toševski has been declaring and establishing independent Free Territories by means of drawing physical borderlines and using propaganda devices. Within the outlined borders of the Territory, any activity or object is declared an artistic action or art object. Liberating public space from various pretexts and turning the citizen into a free artist in that particular marked public space is one of the goals of the project. But, at the same time, it is also a strong commentary on the practice of collective mark making in space to establish the boundaries of one’s own territory, to distinguish one’s identity from that of others, to claim a piece of land one’s own, which has been so evident in the years of the dissolution of post-socialist Yugoslavia. The project employs a tactic of overidentification, defined by Slavoj Žižek as “simply taking the power discourse at its (public) word, acting as if it really means what it explicitly says (and promises)”¹⁸. The articulation of that “hidden reverse”¹⁹ that every ideological message has to it, brings into light the double-sided ambivalent aspect of the message. In 2009, one of his works in the *Territories* project, a yellow cross drawn in the main

¹⁶ Mijalkovic and Urbanek, *Skopje – The World’s Bastard: Architecture of the Divided City*, 10.

¹⁷ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 37.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues On The Left*, London and New York: Verso, 2000, 220.

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989.

square in Skopje, was hastily removed by the city authorities in less than 10 hours after it was made by the artist, even though the artist acquired the necessary license to create and display his work in that public space. The cross was drawn on a particular spot in the main square where the Macedonian conservative Government planned to reconstruct an Orthodox church from 1926, based on the idea that every European capital has a cathedral. The plans to reconstruct the Church in the city square are part of a much larger Government project presented in February 2010, under the title "Skopje 2014", which includes a wide range of singular interventions in the center of Skopje, such as neo-baroque public buildings, equestrian statues, public monuments, and fountains, even a Triumphant Arch, in a PR effort to establish Macedonian identity in reference to European, Christian, and bourgeois values, and in denial of its Oriental and Islamic Past. With its monuments of Macedonian historic figures, going back to Alexander the Great perching on top The main City square has thus become a hotspot of symbolic demarcation of identity, as well as a major point of contention between the different communities in the city. The announced reconstruction of the Orthodox church in the main square immediately provoked a demand by the Islamic religious community to simultaneously reconstruct a 15th century mosque, also in the main city square. "I knew about the paranoia surrounding this space, but we're talking about public space and a work of art... What is important for me at the moment is that my work has been interrupted – I want to finish it. Whoever erased the work was, in fact, the first artist in my 'free' space. Although they did that purposefully and didn't participate spontaneously in my creative space, but acted on somebody's orders, they were first nonetheless", the artist stated in the interview for a daily newspaper one day after his work was repainted grey and effectively erased from the asphalt of the street.²⁰ For Toševski, the artist is a citizen, too, who reacts to social problems in the city just like everyone else, without siding with any camp.

My own project *The Right to the City* (2008-2010), was installed at the main city square in Skopje, Macedonia, in June 2009. Utilizing Situationist tactics and focusing on a collective utopian intervention into urban geography, this year-long participatory art project explored issues of "ownership" of public space, as well as citizens' power to "write" urban memory as represented by the names of public space in the city of Skopje, thus reappropriating the urban landscape which belongs to all citizens.

Phase one of the project started in October 2008, with a publication of an open call to the citizens of Skopje for "submitting proposals for changes to the names of streets, bridges, parks and squares in Skopje", published on 8 October 2008 as an ad in the largest daily newspaper in Macedonia, "Dnevnik". The objective was to come to an urban topography that would be inclusive of, and consist not of narratives of conquerors, heroes and wars, which only serve to divide the different communities of the city (as highlighted in the fact that predominantly Albanian municipalities would chose the names of Albanian historic dates and figures, and predominantly Macedonian municipalities would chose Macedonian historic dates and figures, often conflicting in their readings of history).

The open call stated:

The city of Skopje is not defined by its buildings or other facilities. This city is defined by its inhabitants, with their family ties, labor relations, with their knowledge and actions. It

²⁰ A. Dimoska, J. Frangovska, "Žoltiot krst što gi vzbudi crvenite", Nova Makedonija, 17.10.2009.

is not made up of the past, but of the present which is continuously being created by the people living in it.

Public spaces in the city, such as squares, parks, streets and bridges, which belong to all citizens, should reflect that fact. They should carry the names of people living and working in this city today, celebrate each one of us and not just historic figures. They should mark important dates in our lives, and not the past.

Therefore, fellow citizens, we call upon you to suggest new names for the public spaces in our city. Let's name them after:

- current inhabitants of Skopje who are good parents, partners, friends, neighbors, collaborators;*
- dates marking important events in our everyday lives (birthdays, weddings, etc.);*
- our favorite things, such as colors, sounds, activities, etc.*

Please submit your proposals along with a brief explanation (no more than half a page) online at www.public-space.info or mail them to CC Tocka, 6 Antonio Grubisic, 1000 Skopje.

All proposals will be forwarded to the Skopje City Council.

Let's make this city truly ours.

In the second stage, realized as part of the public art project *The Beautiful City Will Rise Again*, curated by Maja Čankulovska-Mihajlovska, all proposals by the citizens of Skopje collected in the previous nine months (more than 70) were included in a new map of Skopje, exhibited as a billboard on the central square in Skopje for a period of one week, along with a one-day performance by the artist, in which I entered into dialogue with passers-by about their opinion of the initiative and solicited proposals for new names. A survey of passers-by was conducted, to explore their opinion on public spaces in Skopje and solicit new proposals. Furthermore, citizens were encouraged to write down street names directly on the map. All collected proposals, with documentation of the process, were eventually officially submitted to the Skopje City Council, as the body which has the authority to change the names of the streets. So far there has been no such action on the part of City authorities, and thus the project is still ongoing.

This particular project was inspired by the practice developed in the 1970s of former Yugoslav artist Braco Dimitrijević. Questioning cultural and material values, conventions and authorities, Dimitrijević celebrated the importance of the ordinary and the overlooked in his tactical use of instruments of historic memory/glorification: monuments (*David Harper*, London, 1972; *Obelisk Beyond History* – a 33-foot Carrara-marble monument celebrating March 11, a date randomly chosen by a passer-by), plaques (with inscriptions such as *John Foster lived here 1961-1968; This could be a place of historic importance*), busts, street signs, list of randomly chosen names, etc. honoring unknown persons and events. "What I wanted to do was to create a reversal in

meaning... Since urban space is so saturated with messages of culture and dominant ideologies, what I set out to do was to create another space", wrote Dimitrijević.²¹ Understanding that public space is a semantic structure which produces, accommodates and reflects ideological constructs, Dimitrijević's aim was for urban dwellers to establish a new relationship with their environment, and through that achieve nothing less than a different way of thinking and acting:

"Inasmuch as man encounters new content within old forms of presentation, and inasmuch as the possibility exists that he comprehends it, it may be presumed that in the future he will begin to doubt in the exclusiveness of one-way information. This may also result in a new system of associations outside the realm of established, canonized form."²²

According to Dimitrijević, an artist is primarily someone who acts in public space. With a strong understanding of the public context, his inscribing of alternative semiotic content into the city by means of interventions in public space established a new type of relation between urban topography and public art.

Conclusion

Art necessarily requires a public space. Without the existence of a public sphere there would be no art as a public discourse. Public space is key to the very possibility of existence of free speech, since one can practice free speech only in public space. Public space is the central aspect of a democratic society because it is in public space, put in a Habermasian manner, where citizens gather to constitute themselves as public in a space free from control of the authorities, which enables them to actively discuss issues of common concern and criticize government actions. Certainly, the Habermasian model of the public sphere is an ideal space that is nominally open for everybody, and the focus is put on rational debate as a means of reaching consensus on social issues. In reality, many social groups are practically invisible or voiceless in the public space, whereas debates are very often monopolized and manipulated by commercial and political centers of power. Besides, even the very concept of the rational consensus has been criticised as hegemonistic and essentially non-democratic. As Mouffe points out, conflict and not consensus is the main feature of democracy, with different social groups trying to articulate different interests. Democracy is processual in its nature. It is always unfinished, it is a continuing process and not a one-time result. Thus, democratic public space is observed as a space of endless contingencies. According to Mouffe, democracy is an agonistic public space (*agon* - competition) where the other is not seen as a rival that should be

²¹ Braco Dimitrijević, *Interview with Jean-Hubert Martin* (2005) quoted in Braco Dimitrijevic. "The Casual Passer-By I Met at 3.01 pm, Philadelphia, April 9, 2007." [Slought Foundation Online Content](http://slought.org/content/11365/). [11 October 2007; Accessed 15 May 2008]. <<http://slought.org/content/11365/>>.

²² Braco Dimitrijević, introduction to Gallery of Contemporary Art, *Braco Dimitrijević* (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, no. 191, Feb 8-25, 1973).

destroyed (*antagonist*) but rather as a competitor involved in a competition (*agonist*). In this radical reconfiguration of Habermas' theory, democracy is seen as a process of inclusion of increasingly many actors in a continuing discourse. I believe it is important to combine this theory of radical democracy with the concept of *parrhesia* that Michel Foucault wrote about, or the fearless speaking in public, the telling of truth in front of others regardless of the consequences, or in the final instance, freedom of speech. All those skills are key to the functioning of democracy as a discursive space.

Given that in democratic societies artists have freedom of speech, they have a special, even a privileged position. This guaranteed right brings them responsibility to use that freedom in order to speak out publicly about social issues, about others' non-freedom or vanishing freedom. And since it is in public place where we practice that freedom, through the refashioning of the urban landscape beyond the old spatial hierarchies and segregation critical public art thus becomes a parrhesiastic practice, speaking fearlessly for the common good. As Vito Acconci points out:

“The built environment is built because it’s been allowed to be built. It’s been allowed to be built because it stands for and reflects an institution or a dominant culture. The budget for architecture is a hundred times the budget for public art because a building provides jobs and products and services that augment the finances of the city... Instead of bemoaning this, public art can use this marginal position to its advantage: public art can present itself as the voice of marginal cultures, as the minority report, as the opposition party. Public art exists to thicken the plot.”²³

²³ Vito Acconci, ‘Public Space in a Private Time’, *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (Summer 1990), 918.

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