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ART INSTALLATIONS AS AN IDEA OF *INTERFERENCE THEATRE*
IN THE LANDSCAPE OF URBAN SPACE

INSTALACJA ARTYSTYCZNA JAKO IDEA *TEATRU INTERFERENCJI*
W KRAJOBRAZIE PRZESTRZENI MIEJSKIEJ

Abstract

According to a common belief from ancient times, theatre is happening all around us while we, the actors, keep playing out our roles in the surrounding existential space. An analysis of the phenomenon of theatricalisation of public space must not disregard the role of art installations as performances which serve as the background and medial tool to evoke the interaction of the viewer and stir his/her imagination, fluctuating between the spatial form and the content – the “spirit of the place”; installations of art are symbols embedded into the contemporary cultural space of cities, which restore the memory of the past.

Keywords: multi-appearance, performance, sculpture, theatre, opera, scenography

Streszczenie

Teatr dzieje się wokół nas, a my jesteśmy aktorami grającymi swoje role w naszej przestrzeni egzystencjonalnej. Analizując zjawisko teatralizacji przestrzeni publicznej, nie można pominąć roli instalacji artystycznej jako inscenizacji stanowiącej z jednej strony tło, ale także narzędzie medialne wywołujące interakcję widza i uruchamiające jego wyobraźnię interpolującą pomiędzy formą przestrzenną i jej treścią „ducha miejsca”, instalacji będącej zarazem znakiem we współczesnej przestrzeni kulturowej miasta, restytuującym pamięć o przeszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: wielozadaniowość, performance, rzeźba, teatr, opera, scenografia

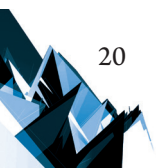
In an architectural and urban context, public space is understood to mean a generally accessible area of particular significance to both individuals and the community, whose primary purpose is to satisfy their elementary needs and higher aspirations, including social contacts, and ensure multidimensional communication. A definition of the concept is also provided in the Polish Act on Urban Planning and Development [1], which, however, does not restrict it to an exclusive domain of planners working on the distribution or redistribution of resources of the natural and cultural space. This process, of distribution and redistribution of space, is not a phenomenon unique to our civilisation; it has been observed since the earliest days of human activity on Earth. An outstanding Polish art critic and historian, Mieczysław Porębski, described space as material in the hands of architects and urban planners; a medium which has been continuously used in man's creative activity for thousands of years. He did not see space as an unchanging "matter" given once and for all, but maintained that it is "... being constructed and reconstructed over and over again, each time differently..." [2].

These struggles of man with the "matter" of space are not only the problem of our epoch, since, as rightly stated by Małgorzata Dymnicka. The genealogical table of public space dates back to ancient [3], or even pre-ancient times and public space management efforts have always been accompanied by art [4].

The oldest known form of public space is the Greek "agora", which originally denoted a gathering of citizens with the right to vote, held in a suitable place, and subsequently transformed into the central public space in ancient Greek city-states and became the heart of public, political, religious and commercial life where the necessary edifices were built side by side with autonomous spatial creations (statues, obelisks, wells or altars). For instance, the gigantic bronze and iron statue of the Greek sun-god Helios, erected at the turn of the 2nd and 3rd century before Christ, towered over the entrance to the Rhodes Harbour. The monolithic ritual human figures found on Easter Island, each weighing an average of over 20 tons and measuring 6 metres in height, are in turn thought to have been carved around the years 1,000–1,100 AD and made very special creations within the public space of the island's indigenous people. The presence of art in public space was not alien to Polish ancestors either, which is proved by the cult granite sculptures carved around year 700 BC, i.e. the representations of bears, a monk, a human figure carrying a fish and other forms marked with a slant cross, distributed along the pathway towards the top of Mount Ślęza.

Today the focus of public space studies tends to gravitate towards sociology or, strictly speaking, social communication [5, p. 56], with works of art created in such spaces assuming the role of mediumistic measures adjunctive to that of communication. In this context, let me present a few thoughts about works of art, which an art installation becomes in public space, having regard to the historical aspects of that space; the object of creation drawing from traditions of the site's setting; i.e. the expression or interpretation of "genius loci".

As I have already given a wider overview of the art installation in the public space of Technical Transactions [6, p. 190], I will only briefly outline the definition of an art installation which, "as a multi-component art performance, occurring in the existing space or constructing the space, utilises, to this end, the available media (materials) which in their essence constitute a means of expression..." [6, p. 190]. Viewed in this light, an art installation is a game, an intermedial spectacle and a theatre aiming to pass certain contents onto the



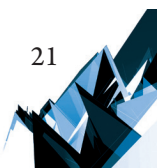
audience, evoke emotions among viewers, engage them in dialogue or, finally, to provoke a reaction or deep reflection.

Historical architectural and urban complexes, both in Poland and across Europe, are protected by law. This entails the unavoidable creative confrontation of the value of “new” art with historical values and, consequently, imposes limitations on the unrestrained, unhindered artistic expression which, in the context of the existing public space, triggers the phenomenon of urban “acupuncture” [7]. An art installation in the public space of a historical city thus becomes an experiment seeking to establish a platform for dialogue between the artist and the place, a dialogue allowing the shaping of artistic awareness and, possibly also, adoption of the paradigm of an “orthodox” art installation [8, p. 9–17], i.e. one that poses the problem of conceptual art. The programmatic mediality and communicativeness of contemporary art represents victory over social and cultural limitations but also assumes the art’s subsidiary role towards the local recipient (a recipient attached to his/her place), which also applies to the planned duration of the artistic experiment. “The degree of complexity of the task of constructing a work of art within the confines of a city, i.e. of a multidimensionally complex work, requires from the artist awareness of the contents communicated and the unveiling of hidden senses, but also responsible choices with reference to the specific place, the history of its architecture and the well-being of its residents. In traditional elements of the public space (squares, plazas, streets, parks), artistic interventions are at risk of being misunderstood and, subsequently, rejected by the recipients” [8, p. 9–17].

This is what happened to the “unfortunate” art installation in the French Carcassonne by an outstanding Swiss artist Felice Varini, hired to execute a project to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the city’s inscription on the world heritage list at UNESCO.



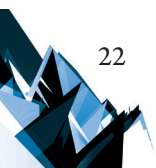
Fig. 1. Felice Varini, “The Castle from Carcassonne”



Spread on the fortifications and towers of the Carcassonne castle complex, vivid thin aluminium yellow strips come together to form concentric circles resembling a giant shooting range. The project evoked inhomogeneous social opinions, oscillating between being perceived as art, irony, an illegible message and vandalism. The vast majority of the 4 million tourists visiting the city each year were amazed that the municipal authorities would approve an installation like this, while the citizens wrote a petition demanding its removal. Purely from the perspective of an art restorer and painter, I believe the social reaction was an exaggerated one, and probably rooted in ignorance, absence of education or promotion of visual activities within historic cities and a lack of competence on the part of the municipal authorities, obligated (in my opinion) to duly prepare the society to the oncoming change in the city's everyday life. It would have been enough to publicly explain the technique and duration of the experiment before the artistic activity at the unique site of Carcassonne commenced. I am convinced that no self-respecting conceptual artist would dare to 'commit a crime' on any monument (we must not confuse the key notions and classifications of visual arts; the art installation does not fall into the category of "shock art"). What we are dealing with here is engaged, critical and thoughtful art, assuming, obviously, that a medial action like this satisfies the criteria below. Firstly, it should be deeply contextual, i.e. dependent on time and location. Only then is it raised to the status of a work of art which, in the historical space, should assume a temporary nature and offer reversibility of the technique. The art installation in Carcassonne was, in fact, a momentary and elusive action. The artist used a non-invasive technique which did not produce permanent effects and, therefore, could not be classified as devastation of the monument. This is a typical performance of the artist on architectural facilities, where he generally uses all kinds of figures, shapes, lines and geometrical solids to create transparent images on huge spatial plains. All his images are decipherable only from a specific perspective. In the example described above, the regular pattern and concentric circles scatter into distorted forms if the object is being viewed from the 'wrong' position. The artist is famed for using simple shapes, i.e. circles, squares, triangles joined together at a single perspective from which the right configuration can be viewed. A configuration that is not accidental, but larded with universal symbolism. The existence of his works is only possible owing to the space in which they are created, as without it they have no *raison d'être*. For this reason, the art practised by Varini is called "in situ art" (a Latin phrase that translates literally as *on site* or *in position*).

For Felice Varini, a painter by education, constituent elements of landscape, whether urban or natural, make a background to painting. This sensual reliance between contemporary and historical forms introduced by the artist finds its rationale in Gadamer's concept of a "game", "play" or "fun" with reference to works of art [9]. Through his symbolic art, the author gives the audience a controversial lesson on the perception of reality, referring to weaknesses of the human mind, individual registers and records and the ability to differentiate between memory and historical truth. Contrary to appearances, what we receive is a deep message, a theatre or spectacle which, if looked at from a completely different angle, will turn into nothing but a chaotic mix-up of different graphic forms.

An art installation can, and should, not only evoke positive emotions but also provoke deeper reflections and thoughts triggering a quest for true meanings and intellectual links with civilisational and cultural symbols as well as tradition.



One example of such an approach is the historical installation in the German Kassel, a monument and memory site questioning the Nazi censorship imposed on the freedom of speech in 1933. The installation, known as “The Parthenon of Books”, was built using more than 170 book titles banned worldwide by the Nazis. It is a life-size replica of the Athens monument made up of nearly 100,000 once-banned books created by an Argentinian artist, 74 year-old Marta Minujín. This time the “temple” was designed not to worship Athena Parthenos, but to express her attributes as the goddess of wisdom, art and just warfare, and the patron of cities, all associated with freedom, the highest value of man. This imposing work, an expression of intellectual freedom, was presented during the Documenta 14 festival (organised as a sign of resistance against political repression) and erected at the site where Nazi sympathisers burned an estimated 2,000 prohibited books in 1933 in a “book burning campaign” within the 3rd Reich and Austria. The action was conducted by students’ unions gathered around the German Association of Students (orig. *Deutsche Studentenschaft*; DSt). The contemporary installation is a ‘temple’ of imperishable memory of what is lost – the Nazis destroyed mainly Jewish and pacifist literature or books representing classical liberalism, anarchism or socialism or touching on religious themes. Documenta is a prestigious international exhibition of art founded by German artist and professor Arnold Bode in 1955. The first Documenta featured works of art banned by the Nazis, but the event has transformed over time into a major exhibition of modern and contemporary art globally.



Fig. 2. Marta Minujín, “The Parthenon of Books”

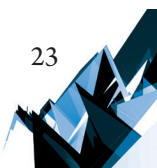




Fig. 3. Marta Minujín, “The Parthenon of Books”

Another installation set within theatrical space is “The Cloud” by Natalia Romik, a Warsaw-based artist and PhD student at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London. It is a project based in a converted pre-burial house that is now the Museum of Upper Silesian Jews in Gliwice



Fig. 4. Natalia Romik, “The Cloud”

Through her work, “floating” in the existing public space, the artist transforms the space into a light, metaphysical scene whilst additionally highlighting the austere context of the place.

The public space allows social activity and becomes an area of overlapping and interfering creation, musealisation as well as theatricalisation. As M. Dymnicka puts it: “spatial, social and cultural concepts, transformations and reconstructions” [11] that occur in the public space shape the city’s identity anew or become an inherent part of its *genius loci*.

The notion of the creation of art installations in urban public space has already been mentioned above. In recent years, sociological research has shed some light on the phenomenon of the musealisation of public space. As emphasised in sociological [12] and philosophical [13] studies, the musealisation of public space is the outcome of the continual filling of the space with more or less valuable “novelties”, the quantity and quality of which accelerates their ageing and thus expands the collection of obsolete novelties, which, when combined with the imperfect tools used to evaluate objects “inhabiting” such space, leads it towards progressive musealisation, i.e. the process of gathering and expanding collections of items from the past. The phenomenon also reflects nostalgia for the past which is inherent to the human condition since, as noted by H. Gadamer, even an avant-garde artist, manifesting a break with past experiences and apotheosis of the experiment, is unable to free his own “self” from the burden of the past which lays deep in his subconsciousness.

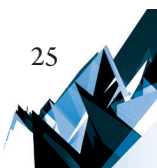
On the other hand, it is worth noting that objects from the past, whose material authenticity gives them supreme value, are delivered by creative undertakings that modernise the public space which, through the efforts of archaeologists, shed light on artefacts from the past and on their expositional, scientific, educational, semantic and symbolic meaning, thus considerably identifying the space and defining the certificate of its cultural identity. In this way, the community using the space obtains attractive tools to consolidate memory of past days, which is perceived as a timeless value. Building on Lubbe’s thinking about the musealisation of cultural space, Bartosz Korzeniowski noted that “the quicker the transformations in late-modern societies, the bigger the function assigned to objects of the past” [14].

An art installation is also a tool used by the institution called theatre which, regardless of the avant-garde forms of contemporary performance and refined staging technologies, remains a “hybrid” creation in contemporary public space (like the city), connecting “objects” from the past with new practical needs [15].

According to a common belief from ancient times, theatre is happening all around us while we, the actors, keep playing out our roles in the surrounding existential space. Epictetus believed that “a true sage should sit among the audience rather than participate in the tragicomic performance which life is”, while Saint Paul teaches Christians to accept this “global performance”, directed and staged by God, who writes the scripts of our lives. Finally, a famous poem by Stanisław Wyspiański, one of Poland’s iconic artists, starts with the words: “I see my huge theatre”.

This “huge theatre” is nothing but a specific public space to which Wyspiański brings a sense of patriotic pathos, sketching the vision of the Wawel Hill’s Acropolis. The poet embedded artistic initiation into the national cultural landscape and searched through it, looking for inspiration for “new” art which he could use to theatricalise the public space.

When following in the footsteps of Magdalena Kozień-Woźniak’s research on the informal space of the urban theatre, which exceeds far beyond the confines of a building and its



traditionally defined substance, focused on theatre which may be happening anywhere and anytime, where anything can be discussed, which has “opened up to diverse expressions and functions of life” and whose mission has the integrated target of offering non-theatrical “other events organised to gather, activate and assemble the citizens” [16, p. 87], it can be observed that contemporary art installations become a form of participation in diverse manifestations, events and functions of public life, thus serving as attributes of interference between the different layers of public, cultural and theatrical space.

An analysis of the phenomenon of theatricalisation of public space must not disregard the role of art installations as performances which serve as the background and a medial tool to evoke the interaction of the viewer and stir his/her imagination, fluctuating between the spatial form and content – the “spirit of the place”; installations of art are symbols embedded into the contemporary cultural space of cities, which restore the memory of the past and, through the situational and semantic context, consolidate the viewers’ (recipients’) awareness of being a part of the theatre, i.e. the “large air spaces, [where] the people they serve and shadows”.

The idea was perfectly illustrated by the expressive and deeply emotional work by Edoardo Tresoldi, who resurrected the “spirit” of the Ed Christian basilica in Siponto without the typical reconstruction of an old building or the outmoded language of social communication. The installation represents a large open air space of interferential theatre, where the people and shadows serve the “virtual architecture”.



Il. S. Edoardo Tresoldi, “Basilica from Siponto”

To sum up, it can be said that an art installation is a phenomenon existing within the area of interference of creation, musealisation and theatricalisation of public space, which can be used as a carrier of ideas, knowledge, symbolism, education and social communication (dialogue) on which the contemporary and historical “genius loci” are fixed.

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