

The relationship between artistic research and the urban environment in the context of global urbanism

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Abstract: The notion of “global urbanism” proposes a dynamic vision of cities, which are perceived as a network formed by multiple spaces that are influenced by political, economic, cultural and ecological factors at a trans-local and planetary level. Studies in the field of global urbanism explore themes such as social inequality, environmental problems, possible alternatives to the urban, etc. Contemporary artistic thinking and practices have the potential to offer new perspectives on the relationship between everyday, urban, and global experience. If the specialized literature draws attention to the fact that global urbanism often focuses on the relationship between the Global North and the Global South, leaving the Global East in the background, the present work aims to identify the ways in which artistic research relates to the urban environment, following a series of examples related to the territory of Eastern Europe.

Keywords: artist-as-researcher, urban environment, public space, Global East.

Introduction

Referring to the cities of the modern world in the Western space, theorist Malcolm Miles stated in the second half of the 1990s that “the disciplines of the built environment – urban planning, architecture, design and art – are currently faced with the choice between continuing to build urban wastelands [...], or developing a new ecologically and socially responsible urbanism, a model of the city that values its diversity and does not seek to impose monolithic perfection.”¹ The author also believes that the role of art in a sustainable vision of the city could have two complementary trajectories: on the one hand, Miles refers to applied art, which he sees as an integrated aspect of urban design, and, on the other hand, he recalls art understood “as a social process, which resists oppression, intervenes in the public interest.”² Through these statements, Miles captures two important aspects that will shape the evolution of the relationship between the visual arts and the urban environment in the coming decades. The first is represented by the strong anchoring of activist, critical and socially engaged artistic practices in the socio-political context of the present. The second is represented by the need to understand the city not as a unitary construct, but

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¹ Malcolm Miles (2005). *Art, Space and the City* [1997], Routledge, London and New York, p. 113.

² *Ibidem*, p. 114.

as a heterogeneous space, in which a multitude of cultural, social, historical, political, etc. instances interact.

The structure of this paper will follow these two aspects identified by Malcolm Miles so that, in the first phase, it will focus on the various ways in which artists choose to intervene in the urban environment, seeking to identify, interrogate and often improve existing conditions, be they social, political, ecological, cultural or economic. A series of roles in which such artists project themselves will be distinguished in order to establish a common denominator that underlies their actions. Thus, if social inequities are emerging as a defining feature of the urban environment, this fact is also visibly translated into artistic projects that target urban public space.

The second part of the paper focuses on how the perception of the city has evolved from the 1990s to the present. Beyond the built environment and public spheres that define the basis of urban public space, cities are beginning to be recognized as complex structures interconnected by trans-local and global networks of flows. Articulating itself as an emerging field, global urbanism proposes the need for practical and theoretical investigation of new methods to combat existing hierarchical relationships and to (re)create sustainable contexts in order to shape new urban futures. In this context, current artistic research has the potential to offer new ways of understanding the urban, articulating inclusive and sustainable perspectives, beyond the limits of current Western models.

In the third part of the paper, due to the wide range of themes and approaches that can result from exploring the relationship between artistic research and the urban environment in the context of global urbanism, it is necessary to structure this relationship with the help of an open theoretical tool. This will aim to capture the way in which artistic research relates to the urban environment, which it approaches in order to create an initial theoretical framework on the basis of which the specific intentions and strategies of these approaches can be identified and analysed.

Artistic intervention understood as a reflection on the condition of urban public space

Since 1990 and up to the present, referring to both the West and Eastern Europe, it can be considered that the relationship between art in the urban environment and the public spheres that make up society is articulated through initiatives that aim to identify, represent and mediate conflicts, interrogate and challenge dominant discourses, social inequities and explore issues related to global or cross-border crisis situations. Thus, the character of artistic interventions in urban socio-spatial configurations is becoming increasingly diverse, evolving organically and encompassing manifestations that vary from the duration of the intervention to the number and type of actors involved and the thematic areas they address. Likewise, the concrete media through which

visual art has been articulated and expressed in the last two and a half decades have been multiple, ranging from traditional techniques related to crafts to the gesturality and presence of the human body and to works belonging to hybrid disciplines that incorporate elements from various scientific fields, such as biology, mathematics, architecture or that of new technologies. Moreover, and perhaps this is the most important factor shaping the relationship between visual arts and the urban environment, multiple hypostases or roles are gradually taking shape in which artists project themselves, consciously or not, through the interventions they propose in the urban environment in which they choose to operate.

They can become disruptive agents in the context of everyday life, often through seemingly jovial and spontaneous interventions that hide complex motivations. An example in this sense can be the project “366 Liberation Rituals” (2008-2009) carried out by Igor Grubić. It materialized in the form of several “micro-political actions and interventions”³ carried out in Croatian public space through which the artist aimed to confront the passivity of individuals in the urban environment and to infiltrate a “virus into the existing order of things”⁴. Grubić stated that his attempt to address the problems of the society in which he lives directly in the public space, beyond the protected environment of the artistic sphere, was met with responses that ranged from attitudes of solidarity and support to disapproving remarks and threats⁵. From the perspective of the political and social theory of “agonism” formulated by Chantal Mouffe, if there is a conflict-type consensus between the involved actors⁶, such interventions in the public space have the potential to lay the foundations for debate-focused approaches that create new opportunities for the development and evolution of society's public spheres.

Other artists are turning to social work initiatives, such as the art group WochenKlausur. For example, through their work “Shelter for Women suffering from Drug Addiction”, they were able to facilitate the establishment of a shelter for sex workers addicted to psychoactive substances in Zurich. The project included the organization of informal dialogues, held during a series of boat trips on Lake Zurich, in which the artists and women targeted by the intervention participated, along with almost 60 representatives from the public administration, local communities of journalists and activists, police chiefs and

³ Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača, “Disobedient”, in Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača (editors) (2009). *Igor Grubić: 366 liberation rituals*, DeLVe | Institute for Duration, Location and Variables and Galerija Miroslav Kraljević, Zagreb, p. 25.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Igor Grubić, *366 Reasons*, in Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača (Eds.) (2009), *Igor Grubić: 366 liberation rituals*, DeLVe | Institute for Duration, Location and Variables and Galerija Miroslav Kraljević Zagreb, p. 41.

⁶ Chantal Mouffe (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, Verso, London and New York, p. XII.

medical experts⁷. As a result of these efforts, the shelter was funded by public funds and was able to operate until 2001. For artists such as those in the WochenKlausur collective, the creative act materializes through socio-political relations and the new contexts they manage to generate⁸. Based on dialogic and collaborative artistic practices, such initiatives developed in an ascending hierarchical system can determine and support changes in the existing social fabric.

There are initiatives through which artists investigate and interrogate certain fragments of the existing urban image, which reflect various phenomena that influence or characterize the condition of a society, such as the crime rate, discrimination, social inequalities, pollution, uncontrolled expansion of the built environment, consumerism, etc. Within the interdisciplinary project "Moszkva Tér (Gravitacio) / Moscow Square (Gravitation)" carried out in Budapest in 2003, the artist Ágnes Eperjesi aimed to reflect on the way in which the urban environment becomes a support for the aggression of advertising images through the work "Advertisement-Free Zone". As part of it, all the billboards in Moszkva Square were supposed to be completely covered, turning into monochromatic surfaces. However, due to limited funds, Eperjesi reconfigured the format of the artistic intervention, choosing to draw the attention of the receiving public to the fact that they themselves become advertising agents in the urban space by the simple fact that they often use bags and satchels bearing the logos of various companies. The artist, together with her assistants, asked passers-by in Moszkva Square questions such as: "How much commission do you receive for displaying a bag with the logo of this company?"⁹ and offered them the opportunity to "hide" the advertising messages they carried with them in monochromatic blue nets. Without aiming to decisively change the attitude of an entire society, Eperjesi aimed to highlight the fact that those who wear such logos in the urban environment become unpaid employees of the companies they involuntarily promote¹⁰.

Some artists choose to bring projects that explore urban memory into public space and address the possibility of identifying and mediating counter-histories. Within the project "Public Space Bucharest/Public Art Bucharest" 2007, coordinated by Raluca Voinea and curated by Marius Babias and Sabine

⁷ Wochen Klausur, *Shelter for Women suffering from Drug Addiction*, in *WochenKlausur*, URL: <https://wochenklausur.at/projekt.php?lang=en&id=4> (accessed on 21.10.2024).

⁸ Grant H. Kester (2004). *Conversation Pieces*, University of California, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, pp. 1-3.

⁹ Hedvig Turai (2003). *Special Section Focus: Public Art in Hungary*, in "Artmargins", no page numbers. URL: <https://artmargins.com/special-section-focus-public-art-in-hungary/> (accessed on 18.10.2024).

¹⁰ Ágnes Eperjesi (2003). *Advertisement-Free Zone*, no page numbers. URL: <http://www.eperjesi.hu/protest/reklammentes-ovezet-advertisement-free-zone?id=11> (accessed on 18.10.2024).

Hentzsch, artist Dan Perjovschi proposes the performance intervention “Monument (History/Hysteria 2)”, through which, over the course of a week, for a few hours each day, he evokes the mining riots of the early 1990s in Bucharest. Thus, a miner and a “hooligan” (intellectual/student) remain next to each other in University Square in various positions that evoke attitudes ranging from confrontation to consensus. The intervention materializes as “an allegory of the present social body, trapped in its recent history as in purgatory and awaiting the writing of this history from an impartial perspective”¹¹.

Sociologist Saara Liinamaa proposes the concept of “artist as urban researcher”, understood as a rhetorical figure that can both bring together the various roles that artists have assumed in practices targeting the urban environment, and propose “alternative models for approaching the complexity of urban life.”¹² As the theorist states, one of the common elements underlying these artistic actions in public space is represented by “the recognition that urbanization represents a dramatic concentration of everyday inequalities. This is, ultimately, the urban problem.”¹³ From this point of view, a complementary perspective emerges as important, which focuses not only on how the artistic environment has developed in relation to the urban environment in the last thirty-five years, but also on how, in the same time interval, the perception of urban space has evolved.

The structure of the urban environment in the context of global urbanism

During the 1990s, once Jürgen Habermas's “Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit” was translated into English, the propagation of the notion of “public sphere” had a significant impact on the public art sector in the American and Western European space. From Habermas’s perspective, the phrase designates a space of social life in which individuals can meet to exchange opinions and ideas in order to identify societal problems. Through free debates, they can reach a common agreement and have influence on the steps in the political environment. Even if the public sphere proposed by Habermas is utopian in nature, the debates that his work has determined have allowed the exploration of this notion and the development of notions such as “counter-

¹¹ Raluca Voinea (2011). *Punctul zero al sferei publice în București* [Point zero of the public sphere in Bucharest], “ARTA”, no. 1, p. 24.

¹² Saara Liinamaa (2014). *The Artist as Urban Researcher*, in Michael Darroch and Janine Marchessault (Eds.), *Cartographies of Place. Navigating the Urban*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, London, p. 92.

¹³ Saara Liinamaa (2014). *Contemporary Art’s ‘Urban Question’ and Practices of Experimentation*, in “Third Text”, vol. 28, no. 6, p. 536.

publics”¹⁴, “counter-discourse”¹⁵ or “counter-public sphere”¹⁶. This new semantic field, along with the notion of built urban framework, is at the basis of the concept of public space, perceived as an organic form of physical and discursive manifestation of society in a democratic environment.

Beyond this fundamental bipartite structure of urban public space, made up of the built environment of the city and its multiple public spheres, the city also develops on other levels. Especially with the transition to the new millennium, these begin to be identified and explored theoretically and practically by specialists in fields such as urban planning, geography, anthropology, sociology, architecture, visual arts, etc. In this context, the city is no longer read as a singular territory, but begins to be described as part of trans-local or planetary networks, whose influences are superimposed on the particular local context.

Such a perspective is developed by theorist Ash Amin, who describes five new spaces that are crystallizing and developing at the urban level. These are represented by the “spatial radiation”, which includes virtual and non-virtual communication networks, the “intensification of the global circulation of goods and people”, which includes various supply chains, migration, tourism or asylum, the “world of affects and attachment”, created by global cultural influences and diasporic connections that exceed the limits of spatial proximity, the “continuous flow of viral, digital, animal and plant life”, understood as a transhuman force spreading everywhere and “new political spaces”, such as virtual public spheres, international organizations, global social movements, or planetary policies¹⁷. The superimposition of these different spatialities of the city over the already existing fabric of the built environment and public spheres, outlines, on the one hand, a trans-human image of urban sociology and, on the other hand, reconfigures the urban everyday as “a place of intersection between topological networks and territorial legacies”¹⁸.

Similarly, theorist Nicholas Whybrow argued in 2011 that “cities should be recognized as a ‘complex of places’, a circulatory nervous system of trans-local flows in which conventional lines of demarcation relating, for example, to nation or ethnicity dissipate or become permeable”¹⁹, thus bringing into discussion diasporic or migrant communities that become part of new ethnic and historical spaces, distinct from their native ones.

¹⁴ Michael Warner (2002). *Publics and Counterpublics*, “Public Culture”, vol. 14, no. 1, p. 73.

¹⁵ Nancy Fraser (1990). *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*, “Social Text”, no. 25/26, p. 67.

¹⁶ Rita Felski (1989). *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p. 155.

¹⁷ Ash Amin (2007). *Re-thinking the Urban Social*, “City”, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 102-103.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 103.

¹⁹ Nicholas Whybrow (2010). *Art and the City*, I. B. Tauris, London and New York, pp. 33-34.

Erich Sheppard, Helga Leitner and Anant Maringanti draw attention to the fact that cities are interconnected by various flows (people, capital, ideas, goods and policies) that often generate hierarchical relationships that “privilege some places and norms to the detriment of others – (re)producing unequal socio-spatial positionings”²⁰, advocating for an alternative approach to planetary urbanism, beyond the theoretical and practical models developed to date in the Western space.

Such perspectives can be correlated with the current notion of “global urbanism”, which proposes an open and dynamic vision of the various urban configurations currently existing in the world. The political, economic, cultural and ecological coordinates of the urban, beyond trans-local relations, are influenced and often depend on factors that have a global dimension. Studies in the field of global urbanism bring to the forefront theoretical and practical approaches that focus on the urban and its ways of manifestation at a planetary level. Still in the process of formation, they aim to outline concepts and reflections that aim at the (re)production of knowledge in order to address issues such as everyday experience, social inequality, environmental problems, future alternatives of the urban, etc.

Studies associated with this loosely structured field also turn their attention to contemporary artistic thought and practices, and artistic research could offer new perspectives on the relationship between the urban and the global. The discursive potential, roles and typologies of contemporary public art in urban space explore, often in an interdisciplinary manner, both pragmatic themes, such as social inequities or democratic access to culture, and concepts such as the social, economic and political imaginary as alternative ways of creating new realities. Similar themes and desiderata are also found in the field of global urban studies, which emphasize the ability of the urban to be shaped trans-locally and to be continuously (re)activated in the local context, and, implicitly, in its capacity to support a sustainable form of existence beyond the dangers associated with exploitation, repression and climate change²¹.

Ways to relate artistic research to the urban environment

The dynamic relationships that are established between artistic research and urban public space suggest the possibility of developing a still open theoretical tool, through which they can be structured and explored, taking into account the context described by the new ways of understanding cities as relational elements in continuous formation. Thus, starting from the tripartite

²⁰ Eric Sheppard, Helga Leitner and Anant Maringanti (2013). *Provincializing Global Urbanism: A Manifesto*, “Urban Geography”, vol. 34, no. 7, p. 896.

²¹ Michele Lancione and Colin McFarlane, *Navigating the Global Urban*, in Michele Lancione and Colin McFarlane (editors) (2021). *Global Urbanism. Knowledge, Power and the City*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 10.

structure proposed by Henk Borgdorff to identify the perspectives through which artistic research is carried out (*on, for or in/through art*)²² and taking into account the emerging context of studies in the field of global urbanism, the following structure can be proposed (Fig. 1), which suggests that artistic research can be conducted *about* the city, *by means of* the city, or *for* the city.

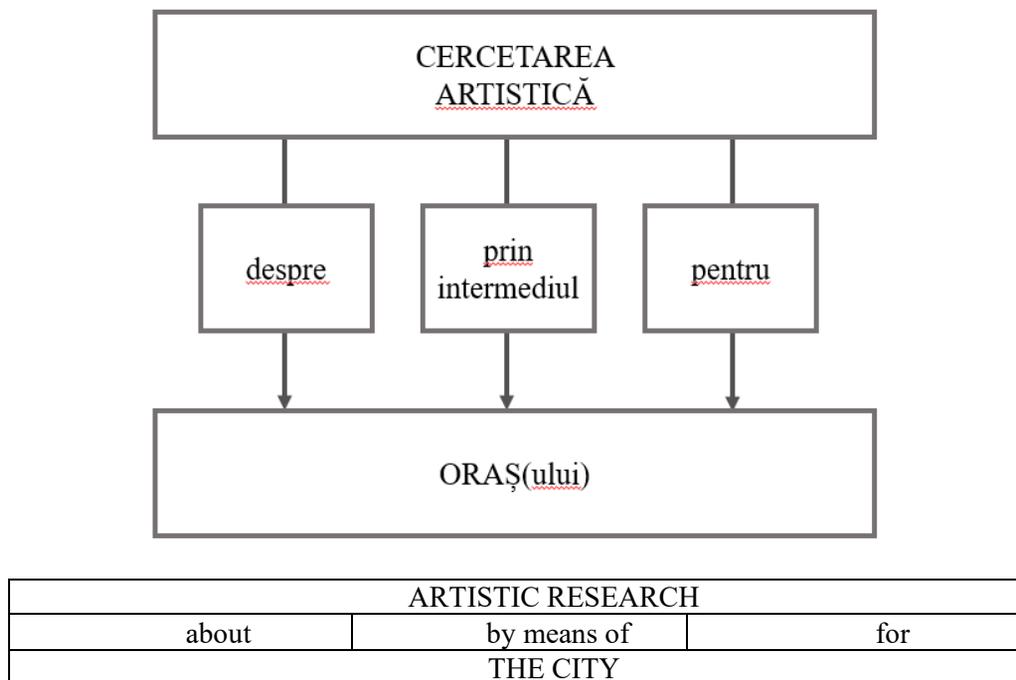


Fig. 1 Structural diagram of the relationship between artistic research and the urban environment

In order to illustrate these relationships, reference will be made to a series of examples related to the territory of Eastern Europe. The motivation for this choice is based on a series of observations by some theorists who signal the need to draw alternative perspectives on the historical, cultural, social, political and economic narratives associated with these territories after 1989, through the prism of how they relate to both the trans-local and the global environment. For example, Martin Müller states that the cities of the Global East (the Middle East, East Asia and the post-socialist East) are reduced to mere footnotes in the field of contemporary global urbanism, both literally and metaphorically, when their

²² Henk Borgdorff (2012). *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*, Leiden University Press, Leiden, pp. 37-39.

existence is only mentioned for the sake of exhaustiveness²³. Müller also suggests that the notion of “Global East” can refer to multiple urban spaces considered interstitial or invisible worldwide²⁴, who are marked by a double exclusion – they do not fully belong to either the privileged North or the marginalized South²⁵. The notion of “Global East” should not be understood as a new “label” to describe geographically or historically the “post-socialist” area, even if, at the moment, the former Eastern Bloc seems to be the dominant space described by this phrase²⁶.

Liviu Chelcea, Slavomíra Ferenčuhová and Gruia Bădescu draw attention to the fact that Soviet socialism also had effects on the urbanization of areas outside the Soviet Bloc, so that the urban experience of post-socialism, studied at a local level mainly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, is relevant at the level of global urbanism research²⁷. To support this claim, the authors provide the example of the United States, where federal support for the suburbanization of industry and urban centres in the 1950s was conceived as a civil defence strategy driven by the fear of nuclear attacks²⁸. The authors also draw attention to the way in which “knowledge and theories about socialist and post-socialist cities were produced under specific historical conditions – those of the bipolar world of the Cold War era and through the post-1989 project of transition to liberal democracy and the capitalist market”²⁹, thus suggesting the need to identify and consolidate new perspectives on the recent history of this territory.

Taking into account that the notion of “Global East” designates spaces that are both interstitial and relevant in the context of global urbanism and pursuing the opportunity to identify new perspectives and narrative instances related to Eastern Europe, this paper proposes a series of examples related to this territory through which it illustrates the three relationships between artistic research and the urban environment previously identified.

Thus, referring to the artistic research carried out on the city, we will take into account the example of the doctoral research carried out by Tiberiu Teodor-Stanciu at the “George Enescu” National Arts University of Iași, under the coordination of Professor Dr. Monica Pop. Called “Conceptualization and

²³ Martin Müller (2021). *Footnote urbanism: The missing East in (not so) global urbanism*, in Michele Lancione and Colin McFarlane (Eds.), *Global Urbanism. Knowledge, Power and the City*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 89

²⁴ Martin Müller (2020). *In search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South*, “Geopolitics”, vol. 25, no. 3, p. 735.

²⁵ Martin Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 738.

²⁶ Liviu Chelcea, Slavomíra Ferenčuhová și Gruia Bădescu (2021). *Globalizing Postsocialist Urbanism*, in Michele Lancione and Colin McFarlane (Eds.), *Global Urbanism. Knowledge, Power and the City*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 73.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

implementation of signage systems”, the work was presented in 2020 and focused on signage as a process of urban clarification. In the fifth chapter of the work, the city of Iași is presented as a case study from the perspective of creating and implementing an urban signage strategy. Part of the steps taken in this regard focus on the involvement of “Atelier Spre”, whose founder is Tiberiu Teodor-Stanciu, in a series of initiatives aimed at improving the image of the urban environment. One of these is the "INTERFACES" project, through which the seven thematic tourist routes proposed by the "Iași.travel" team, made up of professors and students of the Faculty of Geography and the Faculty of Architecture in the city of Iași, were implemented in the city. It developed on several levels, encompassing a series of concrete interventions in the urban environment, such as the creation of street and information panels, brochures, fixed and mobile advertising roll-ups, flyers, which are associated with the publication of an urban exploration manual and the creation of an interactive map that translates important information about the routes into the online environment. In this example, artistic research about the city is manifested through an approach distributed on several levels that relate to each other, but which are coordinated by research and documentation carried out in the academic environment on the concept of urban signage.

Another example that can illustrate the particularities of artistic research *about* the city can be found in the Serbian Pavilion at the 2024 Venice Biennale, curated by Ksenija Samardžija. Artist Aleksandar Denić builds “Exposition Coloniale” in the form of a three-dimensional collage that can be associated both with the fragmented urban image of post-socialist cities and with the anxieties of the related societies. From this point of view, the exhibition evokes neo-colonial and/or auto-colonial attitudes associated with the post-1989 transition period of the Eastern European countries. Through this second example, attention is drawn to the fact that artistic research on the city can also include subjective histories or affective pasts.

The second type of report refers to artistic research carried out *by means of* the city. In this case, the urban environment becomes the framework that supports the research, but the process focuses on artistic gestures or thinking. The secondary plan that the city describes in this context can be social, economic, political, physically built, it can be represented by one or more of the spatialities proposed by Ash Amin and described previously, or by any combination of these elements.

The project “Replaced-Brno” created by Barbora Klímová in 2006 can be seen as an eloquent example of this relationship between artistic research and the city. Klímová reinterprets a series of actions made before 1990 by five Czech artists: Vladimír Havlík, Jiří Kovanda, Karel Miler, Jan Mlčoch, and Petr Štembera. All the performances reinterpreted by Klímová were made in the public space of Czechoslovakia. “Replaced-Brno” has two major directions of

development. The first part of Klímová's approach focused on the reinterpretation of performances as a way of living and experiencing in situ the works that influenced her artistic practice, which she knew only from the materials that documented them³⁰. Thus, the focus is on how the artist perceives the act of reiterating performative gestures made in the past, placing them in a context that has changed over time, both in terms of architecture and urban planning, as well as in terms of socio-political and economic transformations of the Czech space. The second part of the project includes interviews conducted by Klímová with the artists whose performances she chose to reinterpret. Within these, the focus is on analysing and understanding "the intention of these artists and the social and political environment that shaped and defined them"³¹. Through this approach, Klímová states that she aimed to understand not only the motivations behind these interventions, but also how the artists experienced them³². Following the interviews, it became clear that each artist perceived the performative act differently, both through the prism of their own subjectivities and through the reactions of the receiving audience.

A second example illustrating the artistic research carried out *by means of* the city can be found in the International Biennial of Contemporary Art "Periferic 7: Focussing Iași", organized by the Vector Association in 2006. The event took the form of an artistic approach focused on everyday reality, addressing themes related to the socio-political, cultural and historical context of the city. Exploring the relationships that can be established between language, ideology, representation, and public sphere/space, the event mapped the processes of formation and definition of the particular Iași context, addressing, first and foremost, a local audience, thus managing to establish a bridge of contact between the community and the contemporary artistic area³³. "Periferic 7: Focussing Iași" was structured in three different sections: "Social Processes", curated by Marius Babias and Angelika Nollert, "Learning Strategies", curated by Florence Derieux, and "Why Children?" curated by Attila Tordai-S. Within the "Social Processes" section, theorist and philosopher Boris Buden, together with author and filmmaker Hito Steyerl, proposed the work "Mathematics of a

³⁰ Tomáš Pospiszyl (2006). *A replica does not represent merely a copy but part of a dialogue*, in Barbora Klímová (ed.), *Replaced-Brno*, p. 73. URL: <http://animal.ffa.vutbr.cz/~qvklimovab/replacedcat.pdf> (accessed on 10.10.2024)

³¹ Jennifer Helia DeFelice (2018). *Performative meditation and interpretation: Between manual and documentation, between script and record*, dissertation paper, Brno University of Technology, Brno, p. 99.

³² Barbora Klímová, *Barbora Klímová*, in Barbora Klímová (ed.) (2006). *Replaced-Brno*, p. 73. URL: <http://animal.ffa.vutbr.cz/~qvklimovab/replacedcat.pdf> (accessed on 10.10.2024).

³³ Alina Șerban (2006). „A întruchipa Iașul. Spații alternative de cunoaștere” (“Embodying Iași. Alternative knowledge spaces”), in Matei Bejenaru, Cătălin Gheorghe (editors, coordinators) and Alexandru Bounegru, Vlad Morariu and Cristian Nae (editors), *Vector – artă și cultură în context (Vector – art and culture in context)*, no. 2, Vector Association, Iași, pp. 39-40.

Monument”, by means of which they bring to the fore the connections between political power and cultural representation in public space, framing the image offered by the Independence Monument in the park with the same name in Iași in a new context³⁴. The words “Independence is the sum of our historical life. (Mihai Eminescu)” decorate the monument's plinth, and the artists urge the public to meditate on the significance of this message beyond (often subjective) historical narratives, through the prism of the geo-political and economic situation of the present. By associating photographic representations of the Independence Monument with a series of textual elements, through a co-authorial artistic act, Buden and Steyerl interrogate the significance of the idea of individual and country independence, the myths of national identity, and the “autonomous” condition of women in the East European socio-economic context.

The third report proposed in this work is represented by the artistic research carried out *for* the city. In this case, the research focuses from a critical or regenerative perspective on the identification of gaps in the urban environment and pays increased attention to the way in which their representation and/or mediation in public space is managed. As appropriate, the research may aim to propose and even implement different strategies to solve the identified problems.

In the Romanian public space, an approach through which the reclaiming of urban public space is sought through strategies for the reframing of Soviet monuments can be considered as the one initiated by the artist and curator Ioana Ciocan, called “Project 1990”, through which 20 works of contemporary art occupied, one after the other, the pedestal originally dedicated to the statue of Lenin in the Free Press Square in Bucharest. Through this project, which took place between 2010 and 2014, the pedestal was given a new identity, by exploring the theme of “the artist's relationship with totalitarianism and political pressure, of the artistic product meant to support false causes”³⁵, which ends up mediating political messages in certain historical contexts. The first artistic intervention placed on this pedestal was “Ciocan vs. Ulyanov” by Ioana Ciocan, the work being inaugurated on January 26, 2010. A deliberately naive copy of Lenin, executed on a smaller scale, it was made of polystyrene and wire mesh and had the role of drawing attention to the numerous monuments from the communist period that were dismantled and/or completely destroyed. The second work in “Project 1990” was “Replacing Lenin”, made by Andrei Ciubotaru. Reinterpreting the consecrated function of the monument to pay

³⁴ Marius Babias și Angelika Nollert (2006). *Procese sociale* [Social processes], in Marius Babias and Angelika Nollert (eds.), catalogue *Periferic 7: Focussing Iași / Social Processes*, Polirom, Iași, p. 13.

³⁵ Ioana Ciocan (2012). *Proiect 1990*. URL: <https://revistaartaveche.wordpress.com/2012/09/05/proiect-1990/> (accessed on 14.10.2024).

homage or commemorate a person or an event, the artist's proposal places a living monument on Lenin's former pedestal, which aims to create a bridge between the public and contemporary art. This role was taken up by musicians Alexandru Tomescu, Răzvan Suma and Horia Mihail, who together form the "Romanian Piano Trio". Their intervention in public space had a dynamic character, falling within the realm of performative arts, so that the pedestal becomes a stage, and the historical narrative usually proposed by the static monument becomes an active representation in the consciousness of the participants. Also, some of the works of the artists involved in "Project 1990" had critical and ironic attitudes towards the political class of the time ("Hydra", Costin Ioniță; "Red Sharks", Mihai Balko) and towards the bureaucracy specific to public institutions ("a patru", Cristian Răduță). Moreover, some projects choose to treat the period of the communist regime and the one after 1989 comparatively, either from the point of view of the gaps of the capitalist system ("Fresca Eroului Muncitor Capitalist" ("A fresco of the capitalist worker"), Emanuel Borcescu), or from the perspective of collective memory ("Melting", Judith Balko).

The projects "HandGun" by Bogdan Rață and "Where are we?" by Ionuț Barbu bring to the public's attention the dual condition of Romanian society, in search of its own identity, precariously swinging between the post-communist and neoliberal contexts, between the local character and the trends of globalization, between the centre and the periphery. The installation-object "Lenin's Sleep", created by the artist Mihai Zgondoiu, represents a 1:1 scale replica of the monumental statue of Lenin, made of wood, OSB boards and polyplane. The copy mirrors the architectural gesture through which the House of the Free Press (formerly the "House of the Spark") represents, in turn, a replica of the Lomonosov University in Moscow. Zgondoiu states that his artistic gesture lies in the desire to relate to the public, to observe their reactions to Lenin's replica³⁶, now placed next to the base in a horizontal position, with the face painted pink and facing the ground.

Through the "Project 1990" initiative, the artist Ioana Ciocan turns the pedestal of the former Lenin statue from a physical trace of a difficult and painful past into a place dedicated to the interaction between the field of contemporary art and urban public space, implementing a concrete strategy through which collective memory is not forgotten, but reframed and reoriented towards the socio-political context of the present.

³⁶ Mihai Zgondoiu (2011). *Proiect 1990/Somnul lui Lenin/Mihai Zgondoiu (Project 1990/Lenin's sleep/Mihai Zgondoiu)*, interview by Claudia Zidaru, Radio România Actualități, 2011.

URL:https://soundcloud.com/ioana-ciocan/proiect-1990-somnul-lui-lenin?fbclid=IwAR10haKjeWhOmG_1Er5VoVHurH8mZd-haBUc53D4woCV82Un1n4h5LQxvgc (accessed on 14.05.2023).

Conclusion

Since the 1990s, the relationship between visual arts and the urban environment has evolved at a dynamic pace across Europe, encompassing a wide variety of manifestations that address the specific issues of urban public space. Such artistic practices aim to mediate conflicts, challenge dominant discourses and investigate crisis situations, whether global or cross-border. The notion of “artist as urban researcher”, proposed by Saara Liinamaa, materializes as an umbrella term that encompasses the various roles that artists assume when intervening in urban public space, and the point that their approaches seem to have in common is the recognition of the city as a space of social inequities.

In order to establish a starting point in the attempt to better understand the complex nature of the relationships that are formed between the field of visual arts and the urban environment, it was considered necessary to outline a general perspective on how the perception of the urban has evolved from 1990 to the present. Thus, we observe that the urban is today understood as a planetary phenomenon, in which the city becomes a nodal point in a series of political, economic, social and ecological connections on a global scale. Moreover, the city itself is perceived as a sum of multiple spatialities, in which various levels overlap: the built environment, the public spheres, virtual and non-virtual communication networks, global circulation, transhuman flows and new political spaces.

Current artistic practices associated with urban public space are in a continuous process of evolution, (self-)evaluation and restructuring, adapting to the social, economic, (geo)political and environmental context in which they are carried out, while taking into account both the constraints and opportunities dictated by the physical conformation of the public domain, as well as the specific features of the various public spheres of the community to which they are addressed. For this reason, studies in the field of global urbanism are also directed towards artistic research in an attempt to identify new strategies to address the (re)production of knowledge necessary to articulate future alternatives of the urban.

In this new context, the present paper proposes the development of a theoretical tool through which the relationship between urban-focused artistic research and the way it relates to the city can be structured and analysed. Thus, following a series of examples related to the Eastern European space, it is illustrated that artistic research can be carried out about the city, through it, or for the city. This structure is still open and does not claim to be universal. In the course of future efforts, which should take into account the transformations that occur over time in the relationship between artistic research and the urban environment in the dynamic context of global urbanism, it will be possible to establish whether its current form needs to be re-conceived or supplemented.

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