Different Shades of Public Spaces

Liliana Harding (School of Economics, UEA, UK) and *Corina Nani* (Faculty of Arts and Design - UVT, RO)

ABSTRACT: This paper questions the significance of moving public forms of art to the virtual environment for our wellbeing in public spaces, drawing on the example of street art. It addresses the way in which we value public space, and the role played in this sense by public art interventions. The main reference drawn is from a series of street art projects that have triggered an inter-disciplinary conversation between an artist and urban designer and an economist. Based on our joint reflections and interactions with the online community, through podcasts and social media, this paper ultimately highlights opportunities to integrate virtual and urban street art towards a more accessible public space and culture.

Keywords: public space, street art, virtual art, well-being, public art value

1. Introduction

The paper set out to paint alternative images of public spaces that draw on an interdisciplinary dialogue and contrast perspectives on what is valuable in the public space. We first consider real and virtual environments shaping up during the pandemic and blurring the traditional distinction between the private and the public space. The main argument and our collaborative reflection on the value of public space is mediated by the experience of a street art festival and its essential move to the virtual sphere in 2020, under the name of *Virtual Fisart*. Going out from *Fisart* - the street art festival started in the city of Timisoara, and Virtual Fisart - its online manifestation during the pandemic, we experiment here with a dimension of enquiry reflected in the arts-based research movement (e.g. Gerber et. al 2020). The reflection is also grounded in a project on the economics of public art (see Harding, 2019) where street art and its value in the public space have been the main subject of analysis.

Ultimately, the shift of our daily interactions to the virtual world provided an opportunity to rethink the impact of interventions anchored in the local urban environment, through a framework floating in a universal, online public space. This shift invites the reassessment of accessibility of culture in the public space and allows for a comparison of street art that is created in the real, versus the virtual sphere. Ultimately, the experience of virtual street art and spaces makes us reconsider the possibility to enhance the way in which we shape the world around us. It also leads

to the question of what constitutes a more accessible public space, and how that can be enhanced through street art.

The public space is recaptured in this paper, from its conception as a busy transit place, to a destination allowing for contemplation. That is contrasted with an emphasis on public infrastructure prioritising transportation networks in urban design, where people are helped to move away from shared spaces. Such practice reinforces separate private spaces, that define sometimes prosperous individual daily lives, but would ultimately trigger separateness and results in urban decline (see for e.g. Glaeser, 2011). In contrast, public art and design in public spaces allows for the coming together of various dimensions, from the visual to the spatial side of our perceptions, through a unifying human agency and towards cohesion and general well-being.

The public space shaping up during the pandemic has meant a frequent need to merge the private and public sphere, along with our personal and professional lives. This project has also acquired a participatory research dimension, producing a related podcast and reflecting amongst others on how disability or social deprivation can be breached, through art and design intervention. Ultimately, as we transcend the real and virtual spaces, we note new opportunities to consider street art, as a tool to promote a more accessible urban environment and shared public spaces.

2. Valuing Public Space: between a real and virtual platform for cultural goods

While the public space of our cities has been seen in most recent times as a place of struggle, where people gather to challenge established power structures (Bravo 2018), the public space has been historically designed to capture and reflect back the well-being promoted by the urban context. In parallel with the notion of well-being in the urban space, economic development is also measured by the conditions prevailing in such local or urban markets. Nevertheless, well-being for both individuals and the public is known to ensue from a variety of factors beyond the market. Such factors are disjoint from the traditional economic value quantifiable by prices paid

in exchange for goods and services consumed. A good example is the satisfaction we derive from freely available public cultural goods and access to these, both today and across time and space.[1]

There are increasingly louder voices questioning our 'work-life' balance and interaction with others, as the implication of the concept indicates that *life* happens somewhere outside the workplace - with an unclear space of reference. As social beings we are devoting a large part of our efforts to sustain the experience of and the 'highly valued' time interacting with others, that is, time dedicated to families, friends, and maybe our expanding virtual social networks. Within such spaces of interaction, and where the quality of life is being defined, the main exchange we seek is for: support, information, art and ideas - all having the ability to contribute to the level of well-being.

Beyond our daily interactions with more or less remote contemporaries in an extending virtual public space, we also have the privilege of exchanging information across different time frameworks, through the work created by our cultural and artistic heritage. The virtual space in this sense substitutes the market space and has the ability to synthesise and sometimes recreate such inter-temporal goods, accessible as global public goods online (from access to music, to books or whole museum galleries online). In this line of reasoning, we might revere the process by which spatiality and real space loses relevance for human interaction and towards our accessibility of cultural and artistic goods, not unlike in the conceptualisation of the 'invisible hand' of the market. The ever-increasing pervasiveness of communication technologies links people and allows for instantaneous exchanges, in the virtual realm, while also reconfiguring the meaning and the traditional aspects of the public space – such as its role to generate well-being in the traditional urban context. As the pandemic has shown us, we are craving direct and human interaction in the real, public space. While the limitless virtual space has allowed our public spaces to reconfigure and the public arts to survive, the way in which they now appeared to us cannot easily substitute their original format.

---

[1] See, for example Frey (2019) for a discussion on the value of art and culture as understood by cultural economists.

Moreover, limitless as our online public space might seem, it comes with serious limitations for those usually on the fringes of the public space. Such groups are negotiating access along new limitations, from the availability of connectivity, to the ability to enter that virtual space – easily constrained by disability, or even social capital. Should we extend consideration to the access given to cultural goods and public art in virtual spaces, the constraints are reinforced; from the lack of possibility of 'random encounters' with the art in real public spaces, to the ability to enjoy cultural goods enhanced by human interaction – such as the experience of a live concert, the theatre or a mural on a real city wall. Despite such limitations, the migration of public art forms to the virtual space - including the example of street art that we have used as a point of departure in our discussion - have allowed us to both appreciate and reappraise the value we derive from alternative forms of public spaces. The next section looks more closely at the way in which street art, which has been inherently constructed as an inclusive art form, accessible to all in the city space, has redefined itself and learnt from the experience of numerous lockdowns during a pandemic. In this sense, it has both the potential to re-emerge as a more enhanced form of art and to review its mission upon return to real public spaces. It could achieve a more forceful interaction with everyone sharing the public space, allowing for enhanced inclusion and representation. We propose to explore next the perception and significance of public spaces to the street artist and her proposed way to enhance it.

3. Artists' intervention in the public spaces

Attracted by the dynamics of the city, by urban life, there has always been a desire for research and expression in the public space. Each wall and building have a story to tell. They have a special path in history, and each of these elements are unique in their own ways. The city becomes a living ideological and material organism loaded with meaning, values, signs and symbols. It is the scene of spontaneous artistic intervention: the "beautiful city", the "public city", the "social city". The urban space is - at least as a Kantian 'regulatory ideal'- the city of the future that, even if only in its micro-interventions, contemporary art aims at. This is precisely the offer and challenge of artists to the political and economic sphere in which it operates. Along with the architectural - heritage and aesthetic-cultural urban regeneration, policy makers must consider that wider and deeper, proper significance of the public space accrues to the social dimension of the city for all.

As the philosopher Henri Lefebvre put it in a famous proposition, this is the 'right to the city' (e.g. Ghiu, 2016).

In a careful reading of what the 'right to the city' implies, it emerges that this does not refer to a nostalgic and sentimental call to return to the past. Instead, it recognises the importance of urban space as making 'the right to the city' a requirement and a right - to information, as well as art and culture, and the use of services. Here users make known their ideas about the time and space of their activities in urban areas, accessing the main part of the city or its centre core. Following the seminal publication in 1968, Henri Lefebvre wrote many works on the city, urbanism and spaces, the best known being *The Production of Space* (e.g. Lefebvre, 2016). This is directly related to the 'right to the city', stating the need to acknowledge the socio-multidisciplinary dimension of space. The argument goes on to suggest that giving empty spaces a meaning becomes the common practice in various stages for artistic and expressive interventions. Lefebvre understood urban space as a continuous, active process in everyday life. His view, which we are adopting, emphasizes the daily experiences of urban space, describing the concept of the 'right to the city' as the right to act and make public space more attractive. It is precisely through such spontaneous interventions on space that the artist considers having a major impact on the evolution of urban life. The significance of real urban environments relative to the virtual space for the public artist is to be addressed next.

4. Moving street art from the real to the virtual public space

The visual dimension of our real urban environment has been temporarily reduced to our own private dwellings, whereas the virtual space has filled the void of the emptying real public sphere. Our first question is how street art itself can be reconfigured to facilitate ongoing access and inclusivity of what normally belongs to public spaces. Then, can the virtual space substitute or complement and perhaps enhance the public space and street art beyond such temporary closures? Finally, what can public artists do in the virtual space to which the pandemic temporary confines them, and what can they learn from the experience of such urban space closure?

We know that public space is a common value, a meeting place, including in the virtual space created by new technologies. Let us remind the reader in this context of the perception of

street art over many years as an illegal activity, unworthy on the art market and classified as delinquency rather than creation of value in the city space. We first wish to reframe street art in public spaces as a new way to enhance and reflect the well-being of society, even where it sometimes generates negative reactions from the public or local authorities. While acts of vandalism are condemned and are usually labelled as such under various manifestations of graffiti, street art in its positive acceptance is encouraged. The goal is cultural and aesthetic enrichment of the urban space. Being figurative and accessible, street art reaches an audience reluctant to the supposed hermetic character of contemporary art. Moreover, street art as captured by anyone in photographs, taken in public spaces, flows easily with the stream of images that feed social networks. Indeed, social media has made street art not only acceptable, but highly valuable, and perhaps less controversial.

We can also emphasise that photography has been, is and will always be an important component for planning, making and documenting works of art in public space in the context of urban aesthetics. The photos taken are an integral part of the planning process of various works in the architectural and urban context. As it stands, photography of street art in the urban space has been the only certain way in which to access and understand street art in the future. This is because photography remains unchanged, while the work in in the street has been designed to alter over time, or even permanently disappear. As a next step, we proposed for street art to be now created on a virtual city canvas, using photographs of different city walls and spaces. Virtual murals can then be virtually enjoyed and accessed, despite both artists and the public being confined away from real streets and city spaces.

5. Case study: Fisart as street art between the real and the virtual public space

From the temptation to intervene in the public space, to experiment artistically with visual codes that reflect different ideals, messages and perceptions about the world, the *Fisart* (i.e. the Timișoara International Street Art Festival) concept was born. Over the years it acquired public artistic value and became internationally recognised thanks to renowned international artists contributing to the city's public space. The city of Timisoara has emerged as a scene where the possibilities of artistic expression are unlimited, accessible, and never finalised. *Fisart* is the most

representative Street Art festival in Romania, transforming in just a few years the city of Timișoara into a museum of street art and bringing together various approaches and styles, as well as the city's inhabitants and its visitors.

The 'right to the city' for artists corresponds to a development of the city's image through visual and artistic regeneration of the urban public space. The transformation of the city, the changes in the existence and structure of human communities, the evolution of architectural forms, new ways of artistic expression as generated by new techniques, technologies and materials, have influenced and transformed in the last century the typology of Urban Art or Art in the Public Space (APS). Moreover, as a form of public art, it is essentially more involved in the life of the community to which this art form belongs. APS has been in fact conceived as a kind of urban art workshop - as performance in progress. The events that *Fisart* proposes in this context brings to the public freshness, and an extraordinary variety of themes, languages and techniques of urban art forms, along with awareness through direct and indiscriminatory public exposure.

As new technologies are taking over at astonishing speed, we find ourselves in a virtual space, somewhat simplifying if not substituting the perception of real public space. We are witnessing a shift in the boundaries between public space and virtual space where 'street art' itself has adapted along with virtual work patterns in various domains. As such it has gained new relevance through the possibility to prepare works in the virtual space and introducing the new phrase of 'making street art from home'. This is the route of crossing street art - as found in the usual context of photography of real street art and shared online- into the virtual realm where we conceptualise it into 'virtual streetart'. One of its prominent manifestations can be found in the *Virtual Fisart* project promoted by Corina Nani, as a form of 'making street art from home'. Some examples of work produced in this framework during 2020 can be seen below, from the series 'At the Window' created by Corina Nani in a residential area of the city of Timisoara. While it currently remains in the virtual domain, it presents urban dwellers with new possibilities and aesthetics that – at the end of an era of public confinement at home - can be brought into their real urban space.

Fig. 1. *Virtual Fisart*, 'At the Window' series by Corina Nani, 2020.

In this instance photography has the role of mediation, of support through which we can transform the image of the city in which we live through artistic expressions and interventions into a work of art in its own right. In practice, within *Virtual Fisart*, by using the photos of city infrastructure, primarily from Timisoara - Romania and Frankfurt - Germany, the initiative

challenged various artists from around the world to imagine what these cities would look like as art galleries. Artists integrated virtually their own creations on the surfaces of buildings (photographs thereof), with the resulting works of art becoming unique examples of opening and creating bridges of communication in a virtual public space with global dimensions.

This new form of public art creates a lot of new opportunities and changes in the way art is experienced and made available to many people around the world, through a virtual museum. Moving artistic creations into the virtual space also offers answers to various current problems: from the formation of identities and landmarks, to aspects of public awareness, sustainability, socialization, integration and conservation of existing heritage – accessible to all.

Following the analysis of the works received from participating artists within the *Virtual* project *Fisart - Making Street Art from Home*, the process of transferring street art into the virtual space was carried out as a first stage. This leads now to another step in the project, with reflection on the way in which art in the public space can capture an ever-wider audience and perspectives beyond the confinement of the city space. Based on the collection of photos produced, a digital map of the cities can be created, as a modern virtual reflection that emphasis various perceptions and the recognition of shared public urban spaces.

Ultimately, artists involved in the *Virtual Fisart* project and Corina Nani as curator, hopes to integrate selected works of art from the virtual space onto the real city walls, after evaluating the public response and views on a set of different works developed on the photographic canvas of the same buildings. That way, the objective is to generate an inclusive information feedback loop, having first used a virtual space drawing on information from the physical space and then reintegrating work created in the virtual space, 'from home', to the real public space. This is to be enjoyed in the urban environments providing the original canvass and with an input from a global public viewing the works on platforms such as Instagram or Facebook, before street art would become reality in the original streets and urban space.

6. Conclusion: from virtual street art to new, accessible public spaces

Introducing an interdisciplinary conversation and discussing our urban versus personal spaces in the context of real versus virtual manifestations of public art, allowed us to deconstruct and evaluate layers and shades within contemporary public spaces. By moving through neighbourhoods and considering certain places and their virtual representation and examples of street art we also touched upon the opportunity to generate inclusivity in the public space.

The *Virtual Fisart* project referred in this paper and the digital map hosting pictures of buildings, from various angles - allowed us to assess the interest generated by different urban public spaces, along with the public art that they host. Following the digital footprint of viewings of such works of art on various platforms, we might estimate for the future the value attached by the public to street art in alternative public spaces, and align art interventions with the interest of those encountering it in the urban setting. A conceivable step is thus to transpose the most appreciated virtual works of art into the real public space, after having gathered valuable information on the public reactions to virtual pieces of street art.

Overall, we were interested to understand how temporary closures of the urban public space have continued our interest in its content and representation in the virtual world. Next, it would be interesting to explore how online public engagement differs with work of virtual public art designed on a photographic canvas, as opposed to work which has been created in the real city space, and is then transferred to a digital canvas. Such exploration should be subject of a separate project, with a focus on changing perceptions and the value we attach to alternative representations of the arts and the 'different shades' of our public space.

References:

Bravo, L. (2018). 'Public Urban Happiness, that is the making of our own world'. *The Journal of Public Space*, 3(2), 1-4, DOI 10.32891/jps.v3i2.1116.

Frey, B. S. (2019). 'Economics of Art and Culture'. *Part of SpringerBriefs in Economics book series*. Springer: Cham.

Gerber, N., Biffi, E., Biondo, J., Gemignani, M., Hannes, K., Siegesmund, R. (2020). 'Arts-Based Research in the Social and Health Sciences: Pushing for Change with an Interdisciplinary Global Arts-Based Research Initiative.' *Forum : Qualitative Social Research*, 21 (2), Art.No. 30, 1-15. doi: 10.17169/fqs-21.2.3496.

Glaeser, E. (2011). *Triumph of the City*. London: Macmillan.

Ghiu, Bogdan (2016) *The urban city and 'the right to the city'*. Available [Online in Romanian] at: https://www.revistasinteza.ro/orasul-urban-si-dreptul-la-oras.

Lefebvre, H. (1968). *Le Droit à la ville* [The right to the city] (2nd ed.). Paris: Anthropos.

Lefebvre, H. (2016). *The production of space.* 15th ed. Malden: Blackwell.

Nani, C. (2020) 'VIRTUAL FISART. Making Street Art From Home. Hosted by EnduRomania Foundation'. Available [Online] at: http://virtualfisart.enduromania.net/