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Doctoral School

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Public Art - based on my personal experience

Specific focus on the Czech Republic and Slovakia

Thesis of the DLA dissertation

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The theme of my DLA thesis is the practice of public art according to my personal experience. In my essay I deal with public art in Slovakia and the Czech Republic in detail; however, I do not try to focus on the complete events chronologically, but on the most significant events and works of art. I chose these countries because I was born in Czechoslovakia and I am of Hungarian origin currently living in Slovakia. The specificity of this situation helped me to understand events appearing in the culture of both states. My essay consists of five bigger chapters.

I. Short historical review of public art

In the first part I deal with the history of the development of public art and outline the most relevant and important events.

Public art itself has its roots in America; its beginning dates back to the 1960s. The social atmosphere of the 60s as well as trading with works of art and the commercialization of art considerably influenced its development. In order to counterbalance the remarkable influence of trading with works of art and gallery systems, some new art forms appeared and got stronger, such as the performance, happening, land art, site specific art, process art, photo, conceptual art and ecological art.

Until the 60s, sculpture was the principal genre of art in the public area. The change which characterized the artists' new attitude to the public space brought also a wider range of genres into art. The political and social surroundings of the era also had a remarkable role in

this process. The fact that art moved to the street meant not only a changing of place, but a demonstration of the changing of art itself as well. It became part of society again and needed communication and interactivity.

In the 70s and 80s some artists turned towards socially underprivileged communities and created works of art together with them. These works of art became the property of the community. Socially guided art activities were formed and artists changed their own individual art strategy into political and social commitment.

The development of public art in Western Europe was parallel with the American situation. The development of public art in Eastern Europe was somewhat particular due to the well-known historical and political situation. The break up of the Soviet block led to a new type of freedom. This period was characterized by essential political, geographical and social changes. The distinct appearance of public art in our region can be dated to the 90s. Although since the 60s some events already reflected the features of public art, its massive presence can be dated only to the 90s. In Hungary, after ‘Polifonia’ held in 1993, the next major public art exhibition, ‘Moscow Square (Gravitation)’ was held only in 2003. In the Czech Republic the exhibition called ‘Work of Art in the Public Space’ (Umělecké dílo ve veřejném prostoru) was held in 1998, while in Slovakia the first public art exhibition, ‘Public Subject’ took place in 2000.

II. What do we call public art?

Most of the public art works are interactive, so they suppose the active participation of the spectator – the passers by in a given situation. The end of the work of art is realized through interaction. Using the concrete works of art the thesis based on the theory becomes true, that is, the medium’s reaction varies according to the individual’s experience and depends on mere coincidence.

Public art raises such problems which are typical for the given medium and also affect wider communities within society. Its goal is to initiate a dialogue and discussion and confront problems as well. Communication, which takes place between users of the given medium and artists in connection with the realization of works in public areas has an important role in the given work of art’s reception and acceptance as well.

Public art could also be called a “committed” art, if the word itself, because of its political connotations did not generate a sharp resistance both among artists and theoreticians – however I think this word, together with many other words, is also waiting for rehabilitation – still, it could be one of the criteria of contemporary art.

In my opinion, public art is a kind of interactive art, temporarily presented in the public space, reflecting socially committed problems of the society, which can use all the means of contemporary art. It supposes cooperation with different social groups. Public art reacts to the specific space where it is located, but in contrast to other works of art focused on space, besides physical circumstances it takes into consideration the human, social and historical context as well.

What I consider to be public art is related to the socially sensitive tendency taking into consideration the context that started in the USA and Western Europe at the end of the 60s and in the 70s. In our region public art can be mainly observed only since the end of the 90s.

III. Public art activities in the Czech republic and Slovakia from the 90s until today

Czech and Slovak society, with the exception of the relatively open social communication period in the second half of the 60s, lived under “abnormal” political, social and cultural conditions for 40 years. In the second part of the 20th century the official Czech and Slovak policy and educational policy heralded the social commitment of art but strictly kept within the limits of the socialist ideology and political propaganda. For those who did not agree with the official ideology the only possibility was to present themselves half-officially or through underground presentations.

Until 1992 the Czech and Slovak Republics formed a common state. Despite the long existence of a common state, there were several social, cultural and artistic differences even before the separation. However, it is undeniable that the art in Slovakia is still influenced by the art life in the Czech Republic in the same way as during the whole of the 20th century. Recently we can declare that the development of public art in Slovakia was also influenced by several social actions different from those in the Czech Republic. Artists were faced with several negative manifestations of national self-determination, which was not first of all expressed in their works of art but in the activities of their public lives. For this reason, public art in Slovakia started to develop especially after the political changes in 1998.

III.1. Public art activities in the Czech Republic from the 90s until today

The main initiator of public art activities in the Czech Republic is the Soros Foundation for Contemporary Art Center situated in Prague. The center’s name is closely connected with the biggest Czech public art exhibition of the 90s as well as the publishing of the only catalogue consisting of more extensive public art studies and the regularly functioning public art place, the Wall Gallery. Works of art considered to be public art pieces

can be observed in the Czech Republic as separate compositions since the 60s, but the first compact public art exhibition called 'The Work of Art in the Public Space', considered to be the most important public art event of the 90s, took place in 1998.

III.2. Public art activities in Slovakia from the 90s until today

Traditional statues and monuments of the normalization period characterized art in public spaces in Slovakia after the freer social atmosphere in the second half of the 60s. The unofficial art had to retreat to private apartments and alternative places. Besides the official art, low budget, individual or group street actions, performances and land art works could be presented only temporarily.

After the changes there were some attempts to follow the successful public space artistic events of the 60s.

For Slovak art life in the 90s it was characteristic that besides state galleries and museums, exhibitions were organized also in alternative places, for there were no available galleries on the one hand, and on the other hand there was a need for new content and interpretation possibilities of contemporary art.

We can talk about regular public art activities in Slovakia since the year 2000, when the 'Public Subject' international exhibition took place in Bratislava.

IV. My Public area and public art works

The fourth chapter consists of my public area experience. I have already participated in "classical" public space, site-specific open air and public art exhibitions as well.

Among other exhibitions, I participated in the statue and object exhibition in Piešťany in 1993, where statues and objects chosen mostly from studios were exhibited. Except for some objects considered to be site-specific works of art, we can talk about decorative objects, which "decorated" the park and its surroundings. In 2001 I participated in the exhibition called 'Under Bridges and Along Rivers...' organized by Casino Luxembourg, where the request was to establish site-specific works of art. Occasionally it was successful, but the works mostly reflected the traditional public space approach.

In 2003 I received an invitation to the II Biennial in Valencia in Spain. According to my understanding, the request was for us to have a sightseeing tour and try to think over what addressed us in the city as well as suggest questions to be discussed. Finally the result of the exhibition was that the city's political authority urged us to prepare decorative and positive works of art. In the same year, I got the possibility to accomplish a public art project at the

exhibition called ‘Gravitation’ in Budapest (Moscow Square). At this exhibition I felt that participants (both organizers and exhibitors) wished to define something about those different groups of people who passed by the place and the place of the exhibition itself; to raise problems, questions and perhaps to initiate a dialogue with them. In my opinion, the exhibition at Moscow Square met those criteria which are characteristic of public art.

V. Review of my masterwork, Capsules I, II

In the last chapter I introduce my masterwork, the public area object called Capsules I,II and additionally I describe my experience gained during the exhibition of these works of art.

The Capsule is a minimal space where a person can relax or take shelter. It can provide accommodation for either homeless people or young people who just wish to spend a few hours there. It can also be the new, even more impersonal version of the Japanese capsule hotel. The capsule’s interior design is ergonomic, comfortable, but minimal. It functions similarly to left-luggage lockers at stations or public buildings. Its exterior design also recalls these lockers, although it is much bigger in size. Moreover, unlike these left-luggage lockers, its front door is made of transparent glass that has a shutter inside, which offers the possibility of creating a more intimate inner space. The whole interior and the mattress are covered with white artificial leather, with a shelf at the back where the “visitor” can store his belongings. The interior’s white color serves the purpose of making clear that the capsule is clean.

The capsules can be built either one on top of the other or side-by-side; they can be put together like modules.