
THE SHIFT TOWARD PUBLIC SPACE IN ROMANIAN ART AFTER 1989

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Abstract: My presentation will explore the relationship between art and the public space focusing on the way new public art projects challenge the previously understood notions of public space and public art.

After 1989, Romanian artists and NGOs became interested in exploring and bringing new life to the public space and in the last twenty years an increasingly large number of projects addressed the issues of art in the public space. The growth of this practice, focused on redefining and re-examining the notion of art in the public space was slower in the nineties and faster after the year 2000. In this respect, in Romania, public art can still be considered a new artistic genre, although, in the last few years this practice have gained more attention and support.

My presentation will give an overview of the development of public art in Romania focusing on some of the challenges this practice has faced, and on several public art projects such as subREAL intervention "East-West Avenue," from 1990, and "Spațiul Public București | Public Art Bucharest 2007," curated by Marius Babias and Sabine Hentzsch, and organized by Goethe-Institut Bucharest. The investigation of this kind of art project offers a good perspective on the state of public space in post-communist Romania, where public space in both its physical dimension and as a space for debate and questioning authority suffered strong mutations in the last 20 years. New public art projects question the use and control wielded by state institutions over the urban public space, revealing that although public space is public in theory, it is still very much controlled by the municipality.

I will explore the issue raised by public art and public space in post-communism in conversation with theoretician such as Patricia Phillips, Raluca Voinea and Vintilă Mihailescu.

Keywords: public space, public art, post-communism

My presentation explores the relationship between art and the public space focusing on the new forms of public art, and on the growth of this practice in Romanian art after 1989. I will discuss public art project that have developed in Romania after the anticommunist revolution, artistic projects that bring into foreground controversial issues, and, in the same time, challenge the previously understood notions of public space and public art.

Public art is a complex and controversial field that includes various forms of artistic expression, from sculpture to performance, from permanent to temporary projects. For this reason the question "What is public art?" does not have a single, generally accepted, and definitive answer, not even in Western culture where this form of art has a history of almost fifty years and is surrounded by extensive and intensive discussions.

The situation is even more complex in Romania where new forms of public art have developed only after 1989 and this practice can still be considered a new artistic genre. This statement may seem questionable when Romanian public space is continuously filled with public sculptures. But, most of these public sculptures are monuments and memorials dedicated to important figures and significant historical events that need commemoration, and continue to use, with very little changes made toward a more modernist artistic expression, a "classical" formula for putting up a public art work. The term classical applies here both to the artistic expression (the use of the figurative, of conventional and idealized images, the

existence of a plinth, and the entire layout of the site), and the subject matter of the monument with its ideology: glorification or commemoration, with the purpose to affirm a past. The problem is that this past – one out of many possible reconstructions of history – is presented as *the* past.

Although monuments and memorials have remained vastly supported and generally accepted as the primary form of public art, alongside this practice, a new public art has emerge, and in the last twenty-five years an increasingly large number of projects addressed the issues of art in the public space. The growth of this practice was slower in the nineties and faster after the year 2000. The new public art projects are aiming to redefine and re-examine the notion of art in the public space, and in doing so these projects distance themselves from “classical” monuments and memorials. The importance of new forms of public art in contemporary culture is given by the fact that these projects are not trying to offer an idealized and unified image of ourselves and our past, but to voice our differences, to address controversial issues, to bring people together, and to strengthen communities. These projects question the notions of *public* and *public space*, by bringing into a sharp relief their multiple dimensions: the *public* dimension may refer to site, form of ownership, access or social engagement. From this point of view, traditional forms of public art, with few exceptions, are public because they are sited in a publicly owned space, accessible to everyone. These traditional forms of art, which mainly include monuments and memorials, represent the position of the state with regard to the people and the moments in the country’s history that must be celebrated and are celebrated with no concern for the public’s inclusion, the public’s needs and the way this public uses the public space. In other words, public space becomes an exhibition space used by state authority to affirm its values and construct a national identity and a national history.

The new forms of public art bring under scrutiny controversial issues that mark the post-communist society. A number of them reclaim public space as a space of debate and questioning contemporary issues such as democracy, the representation of national history or gender representations (as was the case of the *Public Art Bucharest 2007*¹ project, or Alexandra Pirici’s performances²), while other forms of public art address the issue of art in public space by putting forth the needs of a community (the case of several events organized by Generosity Attack – la Bomba Community Center in Rahova-Uranus; project *Cartier* – organized by Vector Association in Iasi; or the program *I love Bucharest* organized by Association in the Attic).

To counterweight the permanent public sculptures, many artists have turned to temporary art projects that can have a much greater freedom, flexibility of production and placement of the art work, and a more critical approach to contemporary issues. Moreover, these types of projects are not constrained to be “eternal,” which allows for a more specific and present-oriented message. Art critic Patricia Phillips strongly supports this approach and

¹ *Spațiul Public București | Public Art Bucharest 2007* was a pilot project organized by Goethe-Institut Bukarest in partnership with Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR) and Allianz Kulturstiftung.

² In 2011, artist Alexandra Pirici put under question the representation of the past in the heroic monuments that are installed in the public space, in the performance “*Dacă voi nu ne vreți, noi vă vrem*” (If you don’t want us, we want you) acted near the Carol I monument and the Rebirth Memorial dedicated to the anti-communist revolution, both of them located in the Revolutionary Square, Bucharest.

points out its positive aspects: “Ephemeral public art provides continuity for analysis of the conditions and changing configurations of public life, without mandating the stasis required to express eternal values to a broad audience with different backgrounds and often different verbal and visual imaginations. The errors of much public art have been its lack of specificity, its tendency to look at society – at the public – too broadly and simply. The temporary in public art is not about an absence of commitment or involvement, but about an intensification and enrichment of the conception of public” (303). Phillips considers that public art should give a more thorough attention to its public dimension that is less defined by its placement in a space that is accessible to everybody, or by its public funding, and more by the body of ideas and themes that the artist decides to bring into the public debate.

The public dimension of public art puts different and harder demands on the artist and raises questions that are hard to answer: What issues should public art address? Should public art strive for an “art of the widest possible relevance” (Phillips 194)? Is a work of art *public* if it does not please the audience? Who should select the work of art which will be sited in a public space? In this respect, the Romanian artists’ task to bring new life into the public space after 1989 was not an easy one. In communist Romania, public art was used only as an ideological tool for the benefit of the party in power and other form of public expressions were ruled out. The situation did not improved much in the first years that followed the regime change, albeit from different reasons. Romanian anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu, gives a possible answer to this situation, remarking that the public space in Romania failed to take shape due to the fact that after the communist period the public space was rapidly swallowed by economic and private interests: “The tragedy of Romanian cities, and especially in the case of Bucharest, was the transition from an almost complete state-controlled [public] space during communism to its almost unlimited privatization after 1990. [...] After the fall of communism and, partially, as an understandable (albeit completely disproportionate) reaction to it, common space was “freed” from the state’s control and transferred into private care. And, again, its meeting with the public has failed” (Mihăilescu, “Spațiul public în orașele din România”).

For this reason, in the nineties, public space interventions were few and far between, and mostly were initiated by artists as independent and temporary projects. These projects revealed the artists’ interest in the public space, but not as a long term commitment toward public art, but more as a secondary interest in their artistic practice. This was the case of subREAL³ intervention along “The Victory of Socialism Avenue,” from August 1990, titled “East-West Avenue.” The intervention consisted of 120 iron plates with handwritten inscriptions placed along the avenue that leads from the House of People, now the Parliament Palace (one of the largest building in the world for whose construction Ceausescu demolished an entire neighborhood) to Unity Square. The plates were inscribed with the name and trade of the workers who played a part in the erection of the Palace, and recall the small sign of commemoration that are placed on the site where a violent death has occurred. The artists wanted to bring into the public attention the unknown people who had lost their life for the construction of the building, which was only in propagandistic speech for the people, in

³ subREAL was founded in April 1990 by Călin Dan and Dan Mihălțianu. Iosif Király joined the group in February 1991. In August 1993 Dan Mihălțianu left subREAL, which operates since as an artist-duo.

reality it was, and still is, separated from the people by a thick wall, which speaks about the true relationship between the locus of power, which is inside, and the people, which are outside.

Another project, which also took place in the beginning of the nineties (1994), in Iași, drew attention to the poverty of the working classes that struggled to survive in the harsh period of economic transformations, that followed after the regime change, known as the transition period. In his project *Alexandru cel Bun (1994 - ...)* artist Matei Bejenaru observes and puts under question the state of the public space in Romania after 1989:

Just before Christmas 1994 I set up several home-made smoke boxes (for smoking pork) on a plot of unused land in the neighborhood, and invited the residents to use it. The meaning of the performance lay in the population's poverty. Many of the residents had lost their jobs after the fall of communism and they supplemented their food provisions with produce from their relatives' countryside households. My goal was to continue the project with a documentation of public spaces in the neighborhood once every ten years. In 2003, several such spaces in the city were taken over by building sites for the construction of Orthodox churches...(Bejenaru, "Alexandru cel Bun (1994..)")

The interests toward the public space among the Romanian artists grew after the year 2000, when a lot of NGOs were formed and many of them became supporters of public art projects. In the autumn of 2005, the Association in the Attic launched the public art program *I love Bucharest*, and developed, since then, a series of public and community art projects in Bucharest and in Constanța. In the framework of this program, inspired by other art projects such as *I love Berlin*, *I love Paris* and *I love New York*, the association organized educational projects, art interventions, public art projects and community art projects, aiming for an engaging, participative and democratic approach to art and public space.

The first decade of the twenty-first century has brought a change in regard to the art interventions in the public space. There have been fewer initiatives from independent artists and more initiatives from the NGOs whose aim has been to create a larger framework that sustains artistic interventions, debates, and interdisciplinary approaches to art, architecture and the public space. One of these projects was *Spațiul Public București | Public Art Bucharest 2007*, curated by Marius Babias and Sabine Hentzsch, which sought to open a wider debate regarding the public space and to raise awareness of the precarious condition of the public space in post-communist Romania. The project reunited several Romanian artists (Mircea Cantor, Anetta Mona Chișă / Lucia Tkáčová, Nicoleta Esinencu, H.arta, Daniel Knorr, Dan Perjovschi, and Lia Perjovschi) who produced a series of temporary interventions in the public space. From these projects I like to mention Dan Perjovski's performance *Monument (History/Hysteria 2)* which took place every day for a week at University Square, recalling the events that took place there in 1990, when the miners descended into the heart of Bucharest with the intention to suppress democratic protests against the neo-communist government of the time. The performance silently enacted a painful moment in our recent history through two performers, one representing a miner and one a student, that stood frozen in different positions, like a living snapshot of a past event. Perjovski's performance was an

anti-monument that put the spotlight on an event which because of its shamefulness should not be forgotten.

Organized by Goethe-Institut Bukarest, the project was initiated as a pilot project with the intention to be continued in the next years as a state supported program. Unfortunately, the state institutions were not interested in further backing the project, and for this reason, as a protest to the lack of response from them, the E-cart Association, through art critic Raluca Voinea, that was implicated in the organizational team, launched in 2009 *Departamentul pentru artă în spațiul public* (The Department for Art in the Public Space) with the aim to continue the discussions about art and the public space, even without the cooperation of state institutions.

In the next years other NGOs have succeeded in launching public art programs such as “Visible City”, organized by Alt Art Foundation in Cluj, since 2010, “Project 1990”, initiated by artist Ioana Ciocan in Bucharest, which was active between 2010 and 2014, Expanded Space public art program, developed in Bucharest by Volume Art Association since 2011, and “Waiting spaces” active in Timișoara since 2012 and initiated by Simultan Association and h.arta Group.

Implementing public art project is a difficult task even in Western countries, where this practice is encouraged by several funding programs, like “Percent for public art” decree that is active in most European countries, and in America. In Romania it is even more difficult because public space, in both its physical dimension and as a space for debate and questioning authority, suffered strong mutations in the last 20 years, and there is no interest on the part of state institution to support this form of art. Art critic Raluca Voinea, in an article written for *Arta* magazine in 2011, has drawn attention to the difficulties faced by those interested in activating in the public space: “It is interesting to notice that any form of public expression is closely monitored by the authorities, that the process of obtaining permission for any installation or action in the public space is a long and bureaucratic one, aimed at discouraging the solicitor from such demands and that it is the Commission for Monuments belonging to the Ministry of Culture, and/or the municipality who should approve such demands” (Voinea 26). The public domain where public art takes place is controlled by the municipality which is still reluctant to sustain new forms of public art, so much so that often public officials act like landlords that have to protect their property from vandals, and not like administrators of a public domain that must include and give access to everybody. Alongside the difficulties encountered when dealing with state institutions, the organizers of public art projects are having a hard time attracting financial support, because many public art projects address delicate and controversial issues that are uncomfortable for many people in state hierarchy. For these reasons, the development of public art in Romania is rather slow and this practice has still many obstacles to overcome.

In conclusion, I want to point out that although public art in Romania has had a hard time in establishing itself as an artistic genre, in the present, there is a growing interest toward the public space and the debate around this issue has become more significant.

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