

Gašper Kralj:
New Public Spaces

Neoliberalism extended social borders far beyond the police-protected frontiers of newly constituted states. Denationalization masked not only privatisation and social segregation but also the unilateral appropriation and commodification of memories, languages, identities, lifestyles. Refugees and migrants travelling from “south” to “north” and from “east” to “west” were subordinated to the paternalistic protectorate of governments and civil society (in Slovenia already in the 1980s and 1990s). Meanwhile, internationally sponsored academic, artistic and political projects were reduced to speculative rediscoveries of the Western Balkans as the last resort of “distant nearness” even while they were opened to economic and military interventions. The dissolution of traditional public spaces was the result of a process of transition from bureaucratic socialism to neoliberal capitalism. In sociological terms: the result of the transition from welfare-state to workfare-states with highly mobile and flexible forms of biopolitical exploitation and alienation. Spaces of encounters seemed to disappear.

The experience of Radical Education grew from this situation. Radical Education was initiated by a group of curators at the Ljubljana Museum of Modern Arts as a project/exhibition that would produce a kind of ‘progressive’ micropolitical space within the institution: a critical anti-pole to both conservative and neoliberal tendencies dominating cultural production. Its potential was actually perceived as an “initiative that has nothing to do with either the arts or the academy”. However, limited by the gallery exhibition format, the project was in itself a practice of ‘capture’ of its anticipated ‘radical’ subjectivity. This problem began to unfold in conversations with militant researchers and social activists. They raised questions such as: In what way are we governed not by restrictions or rules “from above”

but by individual self-control and self-domination within diverse institutions? How and to what degree has self-employment and self-management of projects captured some of the most sensitive minds that nurture the concepts and practices of anti-capitalist and alterglobalisation struggles?

In response to this new situation, the Radical Education Collective¹ was created. The aim was to overcome the dichotomy between institutions and movements and to reflect on the openings that this conflictual relation provides. The idea was not only to “learn from” institutions, but to pass on the knowledge to movements and collectives; to invent new conceptual, expressive and organisational tools in order to empower the “will not to be governed this way”.

Although it seems that public spaces have disappeared, there is a fertile realm of social and political experimentation that is reappropriating the meaning of public space through practice. Emerging new public spaces presuppose the transversal collaboration between individuals, collectives and movements “outside the consensus” of both transnational capital and institutions of governance (including parties, universities, unions, museums, non-governmental organisations, etc.).² Importantly, they are not just imagined “alternative” communities. They are *potencia* that act as counter-powers to the dominant production of knowledge and subjectivity.

The history of this reader begins in the midst of numerous encounters and inspiring conversations that we had with activists, artists, critical thinkers, curators, militant researchers and writers from Belgrade, Helsinki, Istanbul, Ljubljana, London, Priština and Prizren from 21 April until 13 May 2008 at the Ljubljana-based Rog social centre and the AKC Metelkova mesto. These encounters challenged not only the distinction between ‘serious’ discussions and ‘infor-

mal’ debates (that instantly reproduce linear time and hierarchical space) but also our mutual ability to listen, talk and share experiences (instead of consuming information).

In the following months, we asked participants to write articles or simply e-mail us elaborated notes for publication. We have decided to publish them in full, with only minor editorial interventions, which has resulted in a book divided in two sections. The first section consists of articles that derive from reflections on rebellious “spatial knowledge” acquired through militant research and political action. The second section contains articles that explore the potential of arts in “re-inventing” new public spaces, including first-hand insights into the history of the contemporary art scene in Kosovo at the margins of the particular situation of “state-building”.

In the opening article Darij Zadnikar accentuates the importance of re-elaborating the community. He places the emergent communities into “no-go zones”, outside of the “political sadness”. By highlighting the traps of the seductive language of liberal intellectuals, party leaders or professional activists, he redefines the notion of dialectics and positions it at the core of militant epistemology.

The three articles that follow are each based on *case studies*, starting with that of the ‘occupation’ of the former bicycle factory Rog³. The occupation of this abandoned factory was conceptualised as a “temporal alteration of its purposes” both to facilitate the legitimacy of the occupation and to rekindle the critique of privatisation and gentrification of public spaces in general. Andrej Kurnik and Barbara Beznec articulate this event politically. They define the Rog community as the “community on the border”, and the border as the “territory of movements”. Yet, the broader question remains of how to prevent this singular new public

space from closing down due to direct threats by the municipality, or transforming irrevocably given the more subtle menace to its organisational form presented by the profit-oriented “cultural alternatives” taking place within it.

The contribution by Polona Mozetič takes us to the inner structure of the Workers’ Dormitory. Her article is based on long-term co-research by activists and migrant workers whose first objective was to disclose and undermine the systemic violence embedded in these institutions. She poses the following question for further inquiry: How can new public spaces (assemblies and public tribunes within the Workers’ Dormitories) empower common notions such as “self-organisation” and “self-emancipation”, not only to cause ruptures which might bring about new visibility, but also to develop new perceptions and new devices to prevent the co-optation of the emergent community (in this case, of the Invisible Workers of the World) by representative trade unions, conservative “site-specific” art projects, et cetera?

Tjaša Pureber reflects on Autonomous Tribune (an initiative developed through a collaboration between university students and the local A-Infoshop⁴), divesting the meaning of the term “revolution” of its historical state-centric disillusion and investing it with the hopes of alter-globalization movements. Gal Kirn and Antonis Vradis intervene with critical commentary on disjunctions between theory and practice, arguing that these unwelcome breaks have brought the social effervescence of alterglobalisation movements into a state of crisis. They also provide proposals for their further experimental cohabitation.

The section concludes with the joint art project by Andreja Kulunčić, Osman Pezić, Said Mujić and Ibrahim Čurić. The process behind this visual self-representation (the last three artists are also the migrant construction

workers on the posters) of the migrant worker structure of precariousness (visa-work-residence-food-family separation) deserves far more than a brief observation.

The second section opens with an article by Bojana Piškur on art as the “act of creation” and politics as the “act of translation” and notions such as “ridiculousness”, “laziness” and the “right to do nothing” as preconditions for Art. Although these notions still await political translation, they are resisting the capitalistic valorisation and commodification of arts. The inside story of the TEMP group, written by its members and their supporters, illustrates this contradiction. They not only provide a critical supplement to the article about the occupied Rog factory, but also partially answer the question of how artists and architects perceived Rog – once it was occupied – as an empty, not a political, space. Janna Graham draws from her own “border” experience of being both artist and activist at the same time, tracing in her article micropolitical transformations, decodifying and re-codifying the position of art in the movements and drawing on the example of the Ultra-Red sound collective from the UK.

Mehmet Behluli and Dren Maliqi elucidate on how political isolation and social segregation in Kosovo in the 1990s motivated the “re-invention” of public space through urban clandestine webs of private homes and cafes, and how these webs were constitutive of the emergence and development of the contemporary art scene in Kosovo. Sezgin Boynik is not only interested in the development of the art scene in Kosovo but also in how contemporary art in general operates within representations of the ruling ideologies. The examples in the presentation by Marjetica Potrč draw on the neoliberal multicultural values; they are problematic since they evoke an image of the “artist on a mission”, fascinated

by local achievements of capitalistic development. Minna Henriksson challenges the normality of the prevailing (nationalistic) homogenisation of public spaces embedded in national symbols that have become so present they have turned almost invisible.

The reader is therefore an inquiry into questions that have been circulating in our recent conversations; a transcript of the common desire to disturb, distract and subvert new forms of governance and to empower new public spaces; a collective contribution to critical thought that facilitates our *walk*.

1. Cf. <http://radical.temp.si/>
2. Cf. Colectivo Situaciones, "Politicizing Sadness", <http://www.situaciones.org/>
3. Cf. <http://tovarna.org/>
4. Cf. <http://a-infoshop.blogspot.com/>