

Editorial

Andrew Hewitt | Melanie Jordan | Emma Mahony

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concerned with the potential of art as a political tool through its role as a form of opinion formation in the public domain. She has exhibited at the Istanbul Biennial and the Liverpool Biennial as well as BAK, Utrecht, Wysing Arts, Cambridge, Milton Keynes Gallery, SMART Project Space, Amsterdam, the ICA London, Centro Cultural, Montehermoso, Vitoria, Spain, the Collective Gallery Edinburgh, International Project Space, Birmingham and 1000000mph Gallery, London.

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Emma Mahony is the course leader for the BA in visual culture at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, where she has worked as a lecturer since 2009. From 2001 to 2008, she was an exhibition curator for the Hayward Gallery, London. She has published widely on contemporary art and curatorial studies as a contributor to peer-reviewed journals including *Anarchist Studies Journal*, *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, *Performance Research*, *Curator: The Museum Journal*, *Art & the Public Sphere* and *Museum & Society*. Her research investigates the relationship between contemporary art, curatorial studies, radical pedagogy and activism. It focuses on investigating how critical institutions and collectives can resist and rewrite the neo-liberalization of the public art sector in Europe.

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How does art, design and architecture enable empathetic and inclusive ways of living together? How do these spatial practices effect public exchange and opinion formation in urban spaces? This Special Issue of *Art & the Public Sphere* journal invites responses to

the above questions, which frame the interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral knowledge-transfer and research action, Spatial Practices in Art and Architecture for Empathetic EXchange (SPACEEX) supported by a H2020 RISE grant. SPACEEX looks to spatial practices as a means of addressing these issues because of their ability to engage new public and foster meaningful partnerships, thereby forging a culture that embraces diversity, difference and discursive exchange within cities, towns and urban sites.

Through articles and accounts of urbanist, art, design and architecture projects, and artist project spaces, the contributors to this issue have each addressed one of the four problems that face contemporary urban spaces in Europe. These problems variously span

- (1) **Demise of public spaces and public spheres of opinion formation:** Seemingly common spaces such as parks and squares, though publicly accessible, are increasingly privately owned. This restricts the way in which these spaces are used, such as the right to free assembly, and enforces oppressive forms of civic behaviour.
- (2) **Contemporary cultural policy and gentrification practices:** Art and culture are often employed as key tools in urban regeneration schemes. While the inclusion and social engagement goals of these schemes are well intentioned, they are often dominated by commercial interests. Therefore, regeneration can be instrumentalized as a vehicle for gentrification and capital accumulation, with the result that existing low-income and ethnically diverse communities are displaced to the suburbs, out of sight of further commercial development.
- (3) **Dominance of the economic in the assessment of cultural value:** Cultural institutions are expected to justify their public subsidies through the provision of evidence-based reports that include simplistic quantitative data on audience access, attendance and satisfaction. Many extant reports limit their focus to these narrow

parameters of measurement and make little allowance for how spatial practices effect public exchange and opinion formation, give minority social groups visibility and reinvigorate democracy. (4) **Lack of archival material and the under-utilization of archives by secondary audiences:** Spatial practices are rooted in complex sets of social encounters and dialogical exchanges and tend to have a predominately ephemeral nature. Often documents, photographs and recordings provide the only evidence of the complex range of social relations they generate. Future archives could play a key role in assessing the ways in which spatial practices effect public exchange and opinion formation in urban spaces.

In their address to these problems, we have asked contributors to also factor in, where appropriate, how the COVID-19 pandemic impacts on the movement of bodies in shared spaces and the responses it elicits in terms of how bodies can gather in space in the future. This challenge has been directly taken up by a number of the contributors. Stavros Stavrides and Barbara Holub variously argue that the pandemic offers a new way of thinking about the future of public spaces that is more inclusive and egalitarian. The demise of public access to public spaces under lockdown measures, is the context for the most recent iteration of Jaspar Joseph-Lester's and Simon King's ongoing 'Walkative' project, and Helga Schmid and Kevin Walker conducted a social experiment that focused on the participant's changing relationship with time during the pandemic.

Stravides notes that the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to a second wave of commoning practices (the first wave coincided with the Arab Spring of 2011 and rise of the Occupy and the Indignados movements). Born out of a sense of urgency, networks of care are emerging from the bottom up to provide for the basic needs – food, hygiene,

communication and security – of those groups who are largely excluded from societies’ social protections. He identifies three factors that have converged to contribute to the rise of the common during the pandemic crisis: the basic human need to survive coupled with a long tradition of mutual help and cooperative practices, and a renewed desire to imagine the world differently. The latter, he argues is coming about through the prefigurative practices of urban or space commoning that challenge and rewrite unjust values that disproportionately advantage some groups over others.

Barbara Holub evidences some of the prefigurative practices of urban or space commoning that Stavrides describes in response to the self-set question of what the new ‘normal’ will be post pandemic? She notes the stark divergence in views between members of the political establishment and the privileged classes who ‘hope to return to the former “normal”’ while those on the left, including artists and intellectuals, view the current ‘state of exemption’ as a rare opportunity to hypothesis and bring about a truly new and more egalitarian ‘normal’ (Holub 2021: XX). She outlines two projects undertaken by transparadiso in Graz and Trieste, which she argues are taking steps in this direction: *NORMAL – Direct Urbanism x 4* (Graz/ A, 2019–21) and *Harbour for Cultures* (Trieste/ I, 2016–present). Through the use of strategies like ‘the production of desires’ and ‘anticipatory fiction’, both projects challenge what the neo-liberal order deems to be normal in the context of urban planning. Holub concludes that ‘[l]istening to artists’ voices, their unorthodox methods to rupture disrupted communication and opposition, and counteracting demagogy – this is what we envision as the ‘new normal’ (Holub 2021: XX).

Drawing on the digitally documented experiences of participant artists based in four cities around the world (Capetown, Berlin, Stockholm and the Marshall Islands) who took part in urban walks during lockdown as part of their 'Walkative' project, Joseph-Lester and King ruminate on the future of walking in the post-pandemic city. They and their participants posit that it will necessarily involve forms of 're-territorialisation, improvisation, creativity and political awareness', and discuss what role, empathy, participation and digital technology might play (Joseph-Lester and King 2021: XX).

Schmid and Walker, motivated by the new societal time frame presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, coordinated a participant-based experiment entitled 'Uchronian Critical Mass'.

The participants found that stepping out of the clock-based rhythm of living and working actually helped their concentration and enabled them to focus on what they were doing at the time rather than worrying about what they had to do next.

The theme of commoning or producing the commons has also come to the fore, with several of the contributions making reference to commoning as a means to ameliorate the divisiveness of our neo-liberal society. In their response to the problem of the demise of public spaces of opinion formation, Andrew Hewitt and Mel Jordan explore the theme of commoning coupled with the concepts of care and collectivity, and ask how they 'can become a primary part of contemporary art practice, and what this type of practice might be like?' (Hewitt and Jordan 2021: XX). Examining the collective practices of SUPERFLEX, The Guerilla Girls, Group Material and Art & Language, they conclude that together the values of commoning, care and collectivity 'can be utilized as a political force towards social change' (Hewitt and Jordan 2021: XX).

Also addressing the topic of care, Fiona Whelan presents her long-term project, *What Does He Need?* The project, which is situated on an axis of collaborative arts practice, performance, qualitative research and youth work, explores how men and boys are shaped by, and influence the world they live in. Whelan confronts the participant's circumstances both through the actions in the project and language she uses to describe it. By referring to the men as marginalized and oppressed, she embraces a politics of structural care and rejects the neo-liberal rhetoric of care-fulness, that denotes these men as 'disadvantaged'. For Whelan, the issue with the language of 'inclusion', similar to that of 'participation' and 'integration' is that it avoids interrogating the power structures people are being included into and the power relations that preside over that inclusion.

Rana Haddad and Anthony Iles variously explore the problem of cultural gentrification. Haddad calls for the citizens of Beirut to reclaim their public spaces, which have undergone extreme processes of gentrification in recent years. Giving the example of two projects undertaken by her students in the Gemmayzeh and Mar Mikhael area of Beirut in 2018 and 2019, respectively, she argues that urban interventions in the form of spatial and temporal public installations have the potential to re-activate citizens and 'trigger political engagement' (Haddad 2021: XX).

Iles considers the role dominant culture has played in gentrification processes in Manhattan through an analysis of three site-specific sculptures by Richard Serra installed between 1980 and 1981. In particular, he explores the subsequent modifications to Serra's 1980 public sculpture entitled *Transport Workers Union (T.W.U)* by artist David Hammons. Whilst Serra's public sculptures could be seen as an homage to both industrial society and its successor, post-industrial financialization, Hammon's works *Pissed Off*

and *Shoe Tree* (1981)¹, ‘introduce doubt and unpredictable consequences into existing chains of signification, civic policing and authority over art’ (Iles 2021: XX). Whilst Serra’s works denote terror, Hammon’s act of urinating on a public sculpture foregrounds the ‘multivalent and transformable qualities of the space in question’ (Iles 2021: XX). This analysis reminds us that the function and meaning of public art is always temporal, and needs to be understood as discursive as well as physical.

Martin Krenn discusses his political artwork at the ‘Friedenskreuz (Peace Cross)’ station of the Wehrmacht Memorial located above the town of St. Lorenz, Austria. The commission was prompted by the fact that far-right groups had been meeting at the memorial. Krenn’s project saw the installation of a 98 feet × 140 feet transparent metal and fabric image of John Heartfield’s work *Deutsche Eichen* directly in front of the memorial. This intervention obscured the first sculpture from view and created further meanings and readings.

Responding to the problem of the dominance of the economic in the assessment of cultural value, Francesco Chiaravalloti argues for a ‘shift of focus from *measurement* to *understanding* in research on the values of art’ (Chiaravalloti 2021: XX). Drawing on an ethnographical methodology that forefronts the importance of ‘understanding’, and focusing on publicly funded opera companies, Chiaravalloti proposes that the previously unquantifiable values that these companies produce for their communities, can be more effectively captured through ‘a bottom-up, contextual, and patient approach’ (Chiaravalloti 2021: XX). Here he proposes focusing on the valorization of practice over theory, on specific contexts rather than generalized ones, and on a slow understanding rather than the immediate need to gather and apply results.

Chiaravalloti argues how art and culture's intrinsic values might be marshalled into an extent neo-liberal value discourse. Adversely, but also concerned with the subject of value, Emma Mahony calls 'for a redefinition of value based on principles of commoning' (Mahony 2021: XX). She proposes that the concept of 'social wealth' – which she argues is being created by radical experiments in producing the commons in a number of alternative universities and art institutions – can offer a viable alternative to the neo-liberal discourse of value.

Finally, Socrates Stratis and Clare van Loenen address the issue the archive and how it is being re-imagined and re-activated to produce forms of empathetic engagement. van Loenen focuses on a case study of Elsewhere, an artist project and residency space located in Greensboro, North Carolina, that functions as a living museum. Located within a largely unaltered Depression-era thrift store and still housing the store's now vintage merchandise, the very conditions that comprise Elsewhere dictate its operational structure. Its contents are constant, but their form is continuously in flux as each subsequent artist-in-residence adds their stamp to the building by re-arranging and altering them. In this regard it could be said to operate as a living archive. van Loenen argues that this unique site offers 'a means for hidden voices to be heard and alternative archiving practices to be tested as a form of community memory' (2021: XX). She highlights the manner in which Elsewhere seeks to secure social change on a hyper-local level by embedding its activities in its local community and forefronting the issues of racial justice and social inequality these communities face.

Where van Loenen investigates the possibilities of Elsewhere as a living archive that engenders empathetic engagement with its local communities, Stratis's 'Contested

Fronts' project, realized as the official Cypriot contribution to the *15th Venice Biennale of Architecture* in 2016, explores the potentiality of the open-source and agonistic archive in spaces of conflict. Responding to the context of the divided city of Famagusta, 'Contested Fronts' intervenes into spaces of conflict through the use of commoning practices of countermapping, creating thresholds and introducing urban controversies. Its goal is to constructively transform conflicts by challenging the normative values and beliefs that cement the divide between communities in this city, and introducing alternative narratives through access to and interpretation of open-source archives.

Note

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