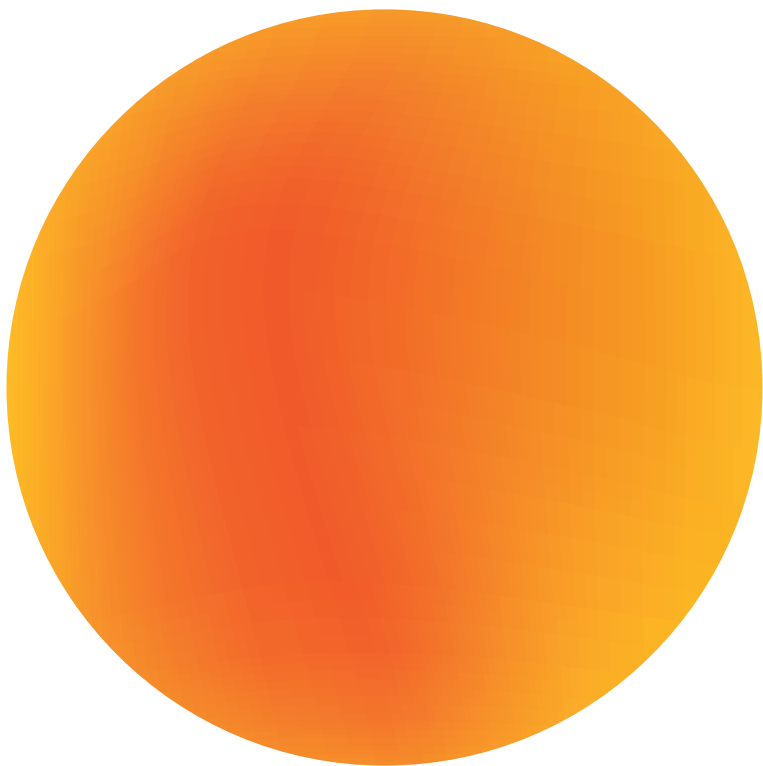# IN THE CITY, EVERYONE IS AN ARTIST

SHRIYA
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Moscow

Where Strangers Meet: Art and the Public Realm

Foreword/Preface by Jo Beall

'I'm not saying I told you so but rappers have been reporting from the front for years.'[1]

Why is the British Council interested in the public realm? 'The public realm can be simply defined as a place where strangers meet'. So says the eminent urbanist, Richard Sennett.[2] If this is the case then the British Council, a cultural relations organisation that brings people together from different cultures, countries and continents, works squarely in the public realm. For around eighty years, through promoting the English language, the Arts and educational links, the Council has fulfilled its Royal Charter mandate to 'promote cultural relationships and the understanding of different cultures between people and peoples of the United Kingdom and other countries',[3] bringing strangers together from all corners of the globe to encounter each other. While formal or mainstream diplomacy primarily involves bilateral relations between national governments, the pursuit of cultural relations happens largely among people – in and through educational institutions, cultural organisations, communities and cities.

Unlike the private realm, such as the family where we know each other well and close up, the public realm is characterised by incomplete knowledge and, significantly, by place:

'Traditionally, this place could be defined in terms of physical ground, which is why discussions of the public realm have been... linked to cities; the public realm could be identified by the squares, major streets, theatres, cafés, lecture halls, government assemblies, or stock exchanges where strangers would be likely to meet. Today, communications technologies have radically altered the sense of place; the public realm can be found in cyberspace as much as physically on the ground.'[4]

While much of the literature on the public realm focuses on politics and citizenship, class and social identity,[5] the so-called 'performative school' offers a more cultural approach, derived from anthropology, focusing on 'how people express themselves to strangers'.[6] Taking this as our starting point our interest was in how arts professionals and performers, policy makers, and citizens, connect through the arts in different public realms.

Cities exhibit a critical mass of social, educational and cultural organisations, concentrations of actual and virtual communities, public spaces, and physical and digital connections. As such, they present a unique opportunity to use the power of arts, culture, education and the creative industries to power city and regional economies, catalyse urban renewal and to promote and share our cultural assets. The British Council has a presence in five cities in the UK and over 180 cities around the world, with its work extending far beyond this to several hundred cities and their rural hinterlands. From this base we are working to support cities in the UK and abroad to be internationally inspired and globally connected.

By using our knowledge, experience and connections we can support cities to achieve their international ambitions, working in partnership to create more livable, inclusive and vibrant urban spaces and places and to improve the quality of life for their citizens through exchange of knowledge, people, ideas, insight, culture and experiences. Our cultural relations approach is built on a spirit of

mutuality and co-creation, which inform this collection and how we engage with art and the public realm.

Most would agree that a good city is one where people's basic needs are met, where public services are delivered affordably and efficiently, where the economy thrives, the environment is protected and where public spaces are not only safe, accessible and affordable but also interesting and inspiring – alive places in which people can engage with each other and where creativity can flourish. Contemporary urban planners adhere to the view that beautiful cities are more liveable cities and culture-led development has become *de rigeuer* for urban planners in many places around the world. Within the arts the concepts of public art and public space are intertwined and as Geoffrey Crossick writes in *Understanding the value of arts and culture*, the cultural force of the city and its built environment plays a significant role in this. Yet as Crossick acknowledges, the tangible role that the arts play has been largely untested.[7]

This is a contested area with some seeing the harnessing of the arts to promote creative cities and urban economies as the instrumentalisation of culture.[8] Conventional public art can also be viewed as exclusionary, foregrounding the interests of elites over ordinary urban dwellers and artist-led gentrification.[9] The conversation surrounding cultural value is engaging with such challenges and the need to develop appropriate means of engagement and participation in the arts. Cities, with their vast and growing populations, their density and networks of public services, spaces and institutions are central to this wider discussion.

Underpinning our approach and captured in the spirit of this collection is that cities are about people and the character of a city itself and expressions of its attractiveness and liveability is generated as much by those who live in it as by its built environment and infrastructure, its governing body or political leadership. Cities are the sum expression of all their people, civil societies and the institutions that define the experience of being in the city.

Where there is an inconsistency between political rhetoric and local reality then city diplomacy efforts will likely be undermined. We cannot project an image of a city as the 'greatest place on earth to live' if the reality is only that for some of our citizens.[10]

This collection focuses on what happens to both identity formation and place making when people engage in the public realm through the arts. Its starting point is to recognise artists less as individual producers of *objet d'art* and more as collaborators, participants or producers of situations, shifting the focus from 'production to reception, and emphasises the importance of a direct, apparently unmediated engagement with particular audience groups'.[11] It explores facilitating participation in the arts in everyday and extraordinary spaces and shares ideas and experience of the public realm internationally.

The collection shows public artists grappling with often complex, social dynamics and relationships as they play themselves out in and through public space. Because art operates beyond the rational and the functional, it often challenges urban planners who by definition are Cartesian in their approach. Yet planners do recognise that cities are social spaces and that social spaces continually change and in the process, that cities are constantly made and remade. Amin and Thrift see the city, 'as everyday process, mobilised by flesh and stone in interaction',[12] growing and morphing around the actions and engagement of ordinary people. This is at the heart of the British Council's cultural relations approach, sharing international experience in the hope of inspiring understanding and opportunity.

Footnotes

1 *Ice T, Los Angeles Sentinel, 7th May, 1992 at the time of the Los Angeles riots.*
   Cited in Edward W. Soja (2000) Postmetropolis, Critical studies of cities and regions,
   Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 374

2 *Richard Sennett (2016) 'The Public Realm', Quant, www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/*
   templates/general2.aspx?pageid=16&cc=gb

3 *British Council (1993) Royal Charter and Bye-laws, London: British Council*

4 *Richard Sennett, 2016*

5 *See for example, Arendt, Hannah, 'Public Rights and Private Interests." In M. Mooney and*
   F. Stuber, eds., Small Comforts for Hard Times: Humanists on Public Policy. New York: Columbia
   University Press, 1977; Noel O'Sullivan, 'The Concept of the Public Realm', 2010, Routledge;
   and Douglas Kelbaugh, 'Three Urbanisms and the Public Realm', Proceedings. 3rd International
   Space Syntax Symposium Atlanta 2001, www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/3sss/papers_pdf/14_kelbaugh.
   pdf; and Richard Sennett, 'Quant: The Public Realm', 2016, www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/
   templates/general2.aspx?pageid=16&cc=gb

6 *Richard Sennett, 2016*

7 *Crossick, Geoffrey and Kasynska, P, (2016) 'Understanding the value of arts and culture',*
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8 *See for example, R. Florida (2002) The Rise of the Creative Class, New York: Basic Books and*
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9 *See for example Miles (2005) 'Interruptions: Testing the rhetoric of culturally led urban*
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   International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 29(4), pp. 740-770; and S. Zukin (2010)
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10 *Jo Beall and David Adam (2017) Cities, Prosperity and Influence: The role of city diplomacy*
   in shaping soft power in the 21st century, London: British Council, p. 23
   www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/g229_cities_paper.pdf

11 *M. Kwon (2004) One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity,*
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12 *A. Amin and N. Thrift (2002) Cities: Reimagining the Urban, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 10*

Where Strangers Meet

Introduction by Claire Doherty

I am making my way along a train station platform in my home town of Bristol in the west of England. It's early summer, a time in which this harbour city reawakens, its public character more extrovert and social for a few short months before hibernating come October. But this morning, most of those around me are moving with the speed of a ritual commute – already mentally occupied with the day. Though physically moving through the concourse of a railway station, these people are already somewhere else – their knees locked under a desk, their faces buried in a screen. There are very few bodies at leisure – unlike the lingering space of the public square, or, for some, the lingering time of the lunch-hour. This is a public space in which bodies are propelled onwards; this is not a place of looking, agitation or agency, nor unexpected encounter. And then something changes…

In amongst the moving crowd are two stationary figures – in worn, khaki soldiers' uniforms. They are standing by the platform edge, waiting, occasionally catching the eye of a stranger. Incongruous due to the anachronistic nature of their historic costumes, they are all the more startling because of their stillness. They're not drawing attention to themselves through any words or movements. They are not exactly theatrical, but they're performing precisely because they should not be here. They are out of time and out of place.

On approaching them, I am handed a card in silence. It bears the name of a Lance Corporal who died on the first day of the Somme in the First World War – 1 July 1916 – and his age, 17. This is a memorial of sorts, but one that understands the public realm not as a stable site, but as a place and a time in a constant state of becoming; a place in which we are all implicated as actors and in which past, present and future are colliding. This is the progressive sense of place that geographer Doreen Massey once evoked as she described 'place' as a collision of events and times, memories, fictions, material culture and meeting points.[1]

My encounter that morning in Bristol was later revealed to be one of over two million uncanny encounters of First World War soldiers in public spaces across the UK on 1st July 2016. Though it felt intimate and specific – it was an artwork of immense scale, disbursed through multiples times and places throughout that single day, accumulating online as a mass public encounter and public memorial.

A project by artist Jeremy Deller in collaboration with Rufus Norris, Director of the National Theatre for 14-18NOW, the UK's arts programme for the First World War centenary, *we're here because we're here* became one of the most celebrated public artworks in the UK of recent years (explored in detail by Kate Tyndall in this collection), and it was a catalyst for my interest in working with the British Council on this new collection of essays: *Where Strangers Meet*.

We're here because we're here is representative of a diverse network of artistic interventions, projects, gatherings and actions globally that are challenging the way in which we think about ourselves, our pasts and our future potential, by changing our experience of the urban public realm. But even within the 12 months since Deller's performers infiltrated my consciousness and changed my perception of the temporal limits of public space, the title given by the British Council to this collection – 'Where Strangers Meet' – seems all the more provocative, all the more politicized than the phrase used by Richard Sennett in 2009 to describe the anthropological character of public space.[2]

Within the past year, as a culture of fear has built around the fault-lines of intolerance, strangers have become the silhouetted figures of potential violence lurking in the shadows of public space. Sennett's promotion of the 'unfinished' city plan, which allows for its inhabitants to adapt and change the public realm, seems all the more fragile.

"In a 'post-truth' world," UCLAN's Professor Lynn Froggett suggests in this collection, "the meeting of strangers in civic space demands ever more effort, reaching across gaps in recognition and understanding, and in urban environments beset by division and discrimination the need arises again and again. It impels the citizen to take a critical and self-reflexive perspective on their relations with civil society and the body politic. One of the key services that art can perform in urban environments is to change the conditions under which 'strangers meet' so that we can know each other better and imagine other ways to live together."

Where Strangers Meet considers the recent artistic, technological and political shifts determining emergent new forms of cultural experience in the public realm and in turn, what is at stake in the emergent forms of our cities' cultures. The voices included in this collection speak from disparate locations across the globe, distinguished from one another by their own set of conditions, and in some cases, distinct political positions. There are, however, some significant shared concerns which emerge globally. These include:

- The encroachment of privatisation on public space and the implications for freedom of movement or cultural expression and new cultural forms;

- The risks of 'artwashing' urban development, thereby disguising social implications and speeding the rate of gentrification at the expense of urgent community needs;[3]

- The growth of a culture of fear which threatens to infringe civil liberties, stalling the potential for individuals to freely adapt public spaces for personal or collective cultural activities, whether that be through exclusions due to political or environmental upheaval or the imposition of state forces of control;

- The rapid development of mobile technology and significant changes to the way in which people are authoring, co-creating and participating in culture and the emergence of simulated experiences and their ramifications for our understanding of what 'public' space might be and how it is constructed;

- A tension between self-initiated, self-directed cultural activity and organised programmatic approaches to city-wide cultural programmes for economic growth.

The collection embraces a broad definition of 'art' in the public realm which encompasses unexpected and unannounced artistic interventions, immersive, dispersed and networked performances and simulated experienced, direct actions and collective, grass-roots resistance through imaginative cultural activities. The collection gives insight into the concerns of architects and planners, but focuses less on form and design, than on the social, political and environmental implications of those creative practices in public spaces. It recognises residents, visitors, commuters and passers-by and new arrivals as active respondents – protagonists in, rather than just witnesses to, the stories unfolding in the public realm.

The meaning of 'public realm' itself is stretched and redefined through these essays by contributors who are concerned less with the theoretical discourse around the terms 'public space' and 'public realm' (see Habermas, Arendt, Mouffe and Sennett) than with the lived experience of publicness. There are clearly defined cultural differences of course in the conditions of public space across these distinct localities: for example, the provisional nature of public realm

from Mexico City to Rio to Cairo and Lagos contrasts starkly from one other, each with its own particular set of political and social conditions, ritualised public practices, architectures and topographies; furthermore the formal character of interior public space evolving through the privatised urban development explored by architect Diba Salam in Dubai contrasts significantly to that described by Karolin Tampere in her consideration of Oslo's harbour area and the work of artist collective Futurefarmers or Dave Haslam's exploration of the club scenes of Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham.

What does emerge are a common set of tactics that use degrees of subversion and collective action as a means to work as artists and cultural producers in the gaps between planning and lived experience. In his description of two consecutive forms of exclusion which emerged in Cairene public space following the momentous events of the spring of 2011, for example, Omar Nagati describes the revolutionary reclamation of public space by the public which led to exclusion through fragmentation, and the securitisation of public space by state control. "Art intervention in public space", he suggests, "work[s] through the cracks of the system, both geographically and politically, using design as a negotiating tool, and subversive tactics to mediate the different forms of exclusion resultant from the periods of flux and of securitisation." This responsive and agile mode of operating by artists, designers and creative practitioners is a common thread to emerge particularly where a city is in flux.

As this collection unfolded in 2017, a 7.1 magnitude earthquake hit Mexico City, rendering contributor Gabriella Gomez-Mont's words all the more resonant, as she spoke of cities who are in the process of imagining themselves out loud. Yet equally, whilst some are becoming acutely attuned to the need to adapt to environmental shifts and changes, so for others the public realm is increasingly mediated and filtered; this is a disbursed and connected public, largely occupying a virtual public space. Rather than explore specifically the internet as a form of public space, however, three writers have considered the implications of creative technology on our experience of physical spaces.

Professors Lynn Froggett and Jill Stein explore how 'play' through digital interaction in this shifting landscape holds out the promise of integration and connection. Stein surveys the digital platforms for collectively authoring spaces, such as location-based and location-specific mobile ambient storytelling; location-based mobile games; augmented reality experiences; and social location tagging/sharing, all of which, she suggests, "blur the lines between the digital and physical public realms by engaging city dwellers with a persistent layer of ambient information."

Froggett asks: "What is the impact on the public consciousness of this repetitive simulation, widespread engagement in flow states… and the 'Disneyesque' aesthetic of much game design? How does it affect human interaction in public space?"

Both authors look at critical, creative practices which are emerging as a form of resistance to a simulated, anodyne public realm to enable what Froggett refers to as a kind of 'deep play' whereby critical reflection and individual agency is triggered, rather than repressed. Furthermore, Tony White offers an insight into a live-streamed takeover of libraries by young people in the West Midlands of the UK as a means of considering the library as a public place free from judgement and catalyst for co-created content and unregulated behaviour. This chimes with Dave Haslam's assertion of the need for self-organised, uncontrolled spaces. "The fact is," he suggests, "great ideas come from the margins."

There is no shortage of future forecasting against which to set these reflections on arts and the public realm, but as William Gibson suggested, "the future is here, it's just not very evenly distributed."

Froggett suggests, "The capacity to affect and be affected by the needs and claims of others – who are not of one's friendship group, community or kin – is a neglected aspect of civic life. Affect flows in public space, as it does in private lives, informing how we act into the public realm as embodied and emotional subjects."

In a recent research inquiry into the civic role of arts organisations, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation identified common characteristics and operating principles shared by arts organisations committed to a strong civic role, namely they are rooted in local needs; develop community agency and build capability and social capital; as well as championing artistic quality and diversity and provide challenge.[4] Such principles are shared by the artistic projects gathered here which work upon the public realm, modelling new civic acts of tolerance, of resolution, resistance and challenge.

This collection tracks starkly different approaches to addressing the inequities of the present – through direct action, through collaborative exchange and by modelling potential new behaviours or processes. In his study of Utopia, Richard Noble suggested that, 'for artworks to be utopian, they need to offer two things which seem to pull in rather different directions: on one hand a vision or intimation of a better place than the here and now we inhabit; and on the other some insight into what Ernst Bloch terms the "darkness, so near", the contradictions and limitations that drive our will to escape the here and now in the first place'.

Former Queens Museum Director, Laura Raicovich spoke, when spearheading a new vision for the museum in 2017, of the importance of the civic role cultural institutions play with reference to the museum's Immigrant Movement International, a community space in Queens that provides free educational, health and legal services. IM is a partnership between the museum and Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, who is interviewed by Gal-dem editor, Liv Little for the collection. Bruguera describes her notion of *arte util* (useful art) as art which is "the elaboration of a proposal that does not yet exist in the real world and because it is made with the hope and belief that something may be done better, even when the conditions for it to happen may not be there yet. Art is the space in which you behave as if conditions existed for making things you want to happen, happen, and as if everyone agreed with what we suggest, although it may not be like that yet:

art is living the future in the present. Art is also making people believe, although we know we may have not much more that the belief itself. Art is to start practicing the future."[5]

The approaches considered in this collection can be seen to embody this contradictory pull: between the dream of an ideal society and the circumstances of the world in which we live. Some, such as Tania Bruguera's Arte Util and the work of Futurefarmers here explored by Karolin Tampere, draw upon the aesthetic strategy of 'modelling', as a process through which ideals are tested as types of micro-utopia, whilst others are more assertively direct actions. This difference is often determined by the ways in which the artworks have emerged: some are the result of commissioning processes, outreach programmes or as part of larger-scale urban developments, others are self-initiated and/or the result of collective action.

A consideration of these provisional, unfolding set of works and movements reveals the potential of art in public to expose and respond to the encroachment of corporate interests on public space, to the diminishing opportunities for social cohesion and to the invisibility of the displaced and dispossessed in public life. The significant risk, however, as outlined in the recent discourse on 'artwashing' and critiques of the 'creative city'[6] is "the deliberate use of arts and culture to secure future profitable gain rather than social inclusion or commentary."

But what emerges from this collection is a more subtle set of arguments for the involvement of artists and artistic practices in the development of our cities through collaborative action, resistance, creative invention and by offering productive alternatives through the occupation of the centre to reassert the periphery. Futurefarmers' proposition for a public bakehouse in Oslo for example operates as the means by which radical approaches in food production enter the space of corporate urban redevelopment.

Rhodes must fall © Schalk van Zuydam

Alongside this utopic modelling of potential futures are the equally resonant issues of grappling with a city's contested past. It is worth remembering that Jeremy Deller's soldier performers disruption of the temporal limits of public space in Bristol last year also occurred in a centre promenade in Bristol overlooked by a statue of slave-owner Edward Colston – a site of consistent and increasingly urgent debate in a city built on the slave trade. Historian David Olusoga explores the implications of public monuments as sites of contested histories through the protest movement for the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town and the subsequent violent rallies which erupted around the confederate statue in Charlottesville this August.

The act of commemoration has always been closely aligned to strategies of storytelling, by which a particular history of the past is sanctioned by those in the present to bring about a particular future. As Boris Groys suggests, 'The future is ever newly planned – the permanent change of cultural trends and fashions makes any promise of a stable future for an artwork or a political project improbable. And the past is also permanently rewritten – names and

events appear, disappear, reappear, and disappear again. The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future – of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control."

As Deller's significant work of art in the public realm indicated on 1 July 2016, the potential of art in the public realm is to assist us with rewriting and reimagining how we live together in the future, but essentially by revisiting the past with new eyes, lifted from our screens, to feel the materiality of being in the physical environment and to look the stranger in the eye.

Footnotes

1 *Doreen Massey, 'Landscape as Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains', 2006 republished and downloadable at oro.open.ac.uk/7227/1/Journal_of_material_culture_pdf_version.pdf*

2 *Richard Sennett, 'Quant: The Public Realm', available to read and download at www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2*

3 *See journalist Jack Shenker's recent article in The Guardian who characterised the threat of privatisation as the "insidious creep of pseudo-public space" where the control of 'acceptable behaviour' ranges from covert policing and surveillance to the less obvious 'planning-out' of free movement*

4 *Gulbenkian Foundation, Rethinking Relationships, downloadable from civicroleartsinquiry.gulbenkian.org.uk*

5 *Tania Bruguera, 'Reflexions on Arte Útil (Useful Art)', available to read or download at www.taniabruguera.com*

6 *See Oli Mould, 'Why culture competitions and 'artwashing' drive urban inequality', Open Democracy, Sept 2017. Download at www.opendemocracy.net/uk/oli-mould/why-culture-competitions-and-artwashing-drive-urban-inequality and Alexander Nazaryan, 'The 'Artwashing' Of America: The Battle For The Soul Of Los Angeles Against Gentrification', read at www.newsweek.com/2017/06/02/los-angeles-gentrification-california-developers-art-galleries-la-art-scene-608558.html*

In the City, Everyone is an Artist

Text by Shriya Malhotra

Today's activist urban residents do not think of art as a distinct system. They use the language of art as a tool to challenge and change their daily reality: from DIY urban repair to struggling for new forms of state representation. Unsanctioned interventions and interactions in our urban environments, combined with mass media connectivity, have become effective transformative tactics for a new, alternative vision for the future.
(An excerpt from Partizaning's 'Manifesto')

Introduction

Reflecting on my involvement as a member of the art collective *Partizaning* hopefully offers insight to artistic actions in the public realm, and the challenges of collaborative, creative place-making in specific urban and cultural contexts. The collective was founded by Russian artists and art historians in 2011 as an experiment in site-specific, socially-orientated street art, and emerged as an online resource to promote guerrilla-style public service while connecting unsanctioned art and civic responsibility. A blog and assorted social media became forums for us to document, inspire, coordinate and promote anonymous but constructive interventions in Moscow, Russia. Although the collective has since split up from being the cohesive entity it once was, we continue to stay in touch and to question those topics which had brought us together in the first place: how people bound by issues in a particular place can work together to address shared concerns, and collectively transform their cities using art and media.

I joined as a conceptual (and aspiring) artist to learn from the others and also support international outreach and as an editor of the website in early 2012, after finding the website during an online search. My interest was to bring inquiry, process and a feedback loop to the projects as well as to analyse the process (and impact) of artistic interventions, and to experiment with ways in which to involve and motivate people while using public space for our own projects. I wanted to explore if, and how, street art strategies were effective in their civic, social or political commentary, and if they could be adapted to other cities, and create my own niche for practice, which in a sense each of us did.

From December 2011 to December 2013, *Partizaning* – through our local as well as global network of like-minded affiliated artists, researchers and practitioners – attempted to leverage available creative tools and technologies to shape the city through collective interventions. These interventions were of all sorts: graffiti, text, participatory murals, sanctioned, unsanctioned, sometimes could be considered constructive 'vandalism' all were based on community research and public discourse, both online and offline. We collaborated with cultural organizations to design official-looking stickers to 'fine' badly parked cars, designed and distributed our own version of the Moscow metro map, painted crosswalks where there were none, installed mailboxes to collect ideas from people about their localities, and tested the idea of street art-based, grassroots place-making in collaboration with cultural institutions and city authorities. I do not think that it's fair to say we were pioneers, or even very original – but I do think for a moment in time, what we did was inspirational to the people around us. Many artists and art groups had inspired us with their practice, and we collaborated with many like-minded contemporaries from around the world to demonstrate the breadth of shared and unique experiences worth sharing but also learn most effectively from encountering each other.

Similar actions and art activist groups have re-emerged in many cities over the last decade. Street art-based guerrilla public service, in the form of individual or collective urban interventions, is an effective way for people to express themselves in the public realm. Socially oriented street art, especially in countries with socialist traditions provided a space for testing how to edit, 'make' or craft the city using fewer resources, and promoting principles of sustainability while resolving issues of local concern. A significant idea which underpinned our work was the idea of ecological sustainability – building resilience among people but using the power of art to gain attention and create necessary discussions.

There is a complex relationship between art and urbanism. The language of unsanctioned street art provides a unique format for free, publicly oriented artistic expression – social, political or otherwise. As cities around the world increasingly face shared realities (traffic jams, pollution, water shortages, crowding etc.), Partizaning tactics for 'participatory urban re-planning' seemed relevant across contexts, and effective to achieve a variety of aims: from 'cylcification' to urban beautification, to social cooperation and even public critique. The archive on our website it seems is a still useful forum for people searching for ideas of ways of creatively working with their environment and community. However, there is a fine line between personal opinion and political propaganda.

One of the first things we considered when implementing our projects in public space was whether the appeal of street art could 'speak to people' and motivate them across generations and cultural contexts – based on the notion that cities were not exclusionary or homogenous or simple entities. We tried to consider whether project efficacy would change depending on whether it is sanctioned or unsanctioned; many of our projects considered how forms of vandalism can be changed and perceived as constructive, collective actions. What we found was that creative actions – making our own DIY navigation, maps, stickers, and ad-busting to promote

social and civic good – were effective ways of encouraging people to be involved in the maintenance of their city, neighbourhood or district while serving as a tool of expression and engagement. However, the issue of legally sanctioned or authorised activity (vs. not) also seemed to change the tone of the actions and their impact – something we experimented with in different ways and formats. It would likely be difficult to catalogue the various projects all of us did, but the point was that in different ways we were creatively engaged with the urban form of the city.

**From Civic Disobedience to Civic Engagement:
Street Art, Urban Interventions & Place-making**

We found that an effective tactic is to use strategic, official-looking statements that use humour, sarcasm and absurdity to highlight authorities who are neglectful of their responsibility, blatant disregard or even socio-political hypocrisy. This is a way of demonstrating civic interest, and is a call for responsibility and taking action across city stakeholders. Generally, however, our version of civic or social street art also aimed at encouraging people to use street methods to freely edit their landscape and also, perhaps, to take responsibility for their city even if it was being neglected by those in authority. In a sense, it was a type of public artistic activism, a rethinking of public arts, street art, civic engagement and activism.

The *Shtrafstoyanka* (January 2012) sticker intervention, named for the Russian word for 'car impounding', sought to startle car drivers who illegally parked in Moscow's congested, downtown pedestrian zones. Guised in the form of official-looking stickers which were stuck onto badly parked cars, to drivers this could have been done by city parking authorities. *Shtrafstoyanka* was essentially targeting Moscow's growing car dominance in an attempt to reclaim space from cars for people – particularly pedestrians. This sort of creative, direct action is easily replicable in any city, but the act of replication based on its perceived success is less the responsibility of the artist. It is up

to interested groups of people and the appropriate agencies to come forth and implement – otherwise, the role of the artist is relegated to simply that of a mimicker of previous projects, or performer. Which is why we don't see copyright as important for public space action – whatever works, can be used, as long as it is not for profit and is in public interest. Repetition is useful, but not ground-breaking or contextual for artists. Rather than importing ideas without thought, creative tactics need to be contextualised and localised, so as to be relevant. This is where arts and cultural institutions can get involved: to support the work of arts and of the artist without compromising their intentions, provide those tools (time, space, materials) to deal with context and to help to bridge them with like-minded communities, or simply to identify issues of concern. This is important because in an era of unprecedented social media and online connections, creative tactics can be easily shared across contexts; however, they need to be implemented from the grassroots – by interested people and not from authorities with a specific agenda. Otherwise, the artist and even the project risks simply being a tool to achieve political ends for institutions under the guise of being "creative" or simply to serve as the PR for political aspirants. Neither of these is an authentic situation given the aims of these ideas. Another problem we faced was avoiding commercialization or political appropriation. Ideas that are effective and creative are usually copied by advertisers and marketers and we tried to emphasize the fact that ideas that are shared and implemented for social and civic good are different and free of intellectual property and attribution, but this is different once it becomes a profit making or commercial venture. These are all necessary risks to consider while working with communities.

Similarly, after we redesigned the Moscow metro map in 2013, in all likelihood we could have attempted the same in any Russian city (or any city really). Hacking everyday signage, another favourite tactic of ours, was also highly dependent on localised dialogues and language. I think as a collective we were not as interested in the hype – sensationalization and surprise was part of but certainly not the goal or main point of our action: we were interested most in the potential

to create dialogue in an otherwise apathetic situation. Using simple design principles and our own personal opinions, we took aim at the advertisements of cars as well as the fact that the metro map seemed to deviate from socialist planning principles, which emphasise walking and public transport use. In another city, different concerns might be highlighted in the design of the map. All that we had hoped was that our action and surrounding media discussion would generate a discourse regarding the city's transport priorities – which, perhaps it did thus, although these creative strategies are sometimes effective because they are placed in unsuspecting spaces, it is the reaction, which they provoke (and not simply the attention they garner), that spurs change – and the creative processes which we shared and reflected became an important part of this process of doing projects in public space. Sometimes it also helps for local artists to work with and encounter artists who are not from their community – to bring fresh eyes, perspectives and experiences. The issue of trust and connection with local community however cannot be underemphasized. So, there are two aspects: the sanctioned, community oriented projects vs. unsanctioned individual actions, and both have different benefits.

Social Artistry and Community Engagement: The New Collectivism?

Throughout history, artists and their work have sought to comment upon or achieve social, political or civic aims, with public realm actions traversing the line between reality and performance. Part of what *Partizaning* succeeded to do was to inspire people to take action wherever they were in a myriad of formats. As a group of strangers working in sync, our project also sought to highlight the power of people working and coming together. We were motivated to share the belief that 'everyone is an artist', popularised by German artist Joseph Beuys, allows creative practitioners to rethink the city as a shared commons, a space for people to freely take civic responsibility through collective actions and forms of peaceful activism. 'Artist' in this case refers to the essence of being human, and one's innate need to create and be creative. Beuys was known for planting 7,000 oak trees as a public performance, based on the idea

that the city was an extension of the traditional gallery or privatised art spaces, which everyone was free to shape. These examples of one person planting trees or even the tradition of tree huggers from India continues to resonate with environmental activists, blurring the line between art and environmental actions across cultures and time periods. Extending Beuys' theory of social sculpture, artists as citizens in the city can be creative in whatever way is available and natural within his or her broader identity. Thus, if everyone in the city accepts that they are potential artists, they can individually, collectively and creatively transform their surroundings. This gives impetus to the general urban population to be actively involved in small scale maintaining and repairing, or larger scale planning discourses, often referred to as 'place-making' in the city. The risk, in my experience, is of artists being appropriated as tools to achieve the broader aims of public or private institutions, Or of volunteerism becoming a forced form of community service and reflective of desirable social morals – converting it into being neither art nor authentic.

Historically, artists as both performers and workers have been recognised for their contributions to the discourse shaping the public realm. My inspiration for any project has always been the sanitation intervention, in which artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles made herself a resident in New York's department of sanitation and shook hands with the men who dealt with the city's trash. This project not only dispelled myths around hygiene, but I think to this day remains my inspiration and favourite example of how arts and artists are constantly up to interpretation. It was also, for its time, ground-breaking in the ways it pushed the boundaries of artistic practice.

Artists have always been an alternative voice to unfolding events. Increasingly, however, what emerges as the most valuable role of the artist seems to be: as a catalyst, mediator or a facilitator, rather than as a sanctioned enactor or authorised worker. Social artistry has continued to evolve in the 21st century in diverse cities and cultural context' responding to shared concerns. A striking similarity in experience has been not to replicate unsanctioned actions, but to

spur collective events and movements. For instance, New York street artist and billboard hacker Jordan Seiler is now known for his mass ad-busting campaigns, and for creating a virtual reality phone app that allows users to replace ads with art on billboards – an effort to take back public space from advertising. There is a shift from individual to collective action, evident in creative civic groups, such as the *Kaam Admi Party* of New Delhi, Sao Paolo's *Muda Colectivo* or *Acupuncture Urbano*, New York's *Do*: *Tank*, Seattle's *Polite Cycling Brigade* and Toronto's *Urban Repair Squad*, whose clandestine interventions are considered less vandalism and more in line with creative place-making around temporary events to catalyse long-term change. One question that emerges from all this is: are spontaneous, individual and unsanctioned actions more easy or effective than collective, community oriented do-gooding? And how can artists resist being co-opted by authorities, institutions or agencies in a manner that frees them of their public realm responsibilities but allows them to continually create critical and expressive work?

A major, recent shift in how artists and institutions work is that individual actions have moved to the realm of being collective actions. The difference with collective action, however, is that it becomes less performative, gestural or provocative, and more logistical; it needs community-based consensus, resource sharing and brainstorming. These are not easy or straightforward to negotiate for anyone, let alone an artist. Collective action perhaps now demonstrates a shift towards the ideas of *anarchitecture* (1970s) rather than urban interventions. Thus, the role of artists and art groups should be re-thought not only to create and encourage or catalyse civic action, but to generate discussions that may not be taking place, to create new narratives that are ignored by the mainstream – to look out for justice and change. The site-specificity of art in the public realm is a crucial aspect not only of decorating and place-making, but also of memorialization. Artists as an almost external profession to the mainstream, is a unique position to critique and question – perhaps the last standing profession to do so.

One of the most interesting insights to emerge from our projects was that cities in countries across the world – particularly formerly socialist societies which have liberalised their economies in the last 20-30 years – experience many similar socio-economic realities. Rapidly growing cities in Russia, India and Brazil experience similar challenges stemming from the privatization of formerly public infrastructural enterprises, environmental degradation as a result of rapid economic growth following the removal of socialist economic protections, etc. We therefore sought to make our work relevant beyond national borders, and to spur an almost transnational civic and social street art 'movement'. This seemed to generate some great ideas, such as ways in which citizens could regulate traffic or even trash systems, and has spurred a re-think of resource-conservation based on tradition. And this is perhaps why going back to analyse what works and doesn't is more relevant now than ever. The risk with not seeking to continue to do this work as the only people that were acting on it is that it may be seen as cultural transformation or propaganda.

A Brave New Art? Artists and Society

The *May Interventions* series (2012) was an example of collective, unsanctioned actions in the public realm and as a series of actions, was much more effective than individual acts because it was small scale and spontaneous. Over the course of a month, we performed urban interventions that ranged from painting crosswalks, putting up a mailbox for soliciting ideas/suggestions, building a bench, and installing guerrilla cycling signs. These created an immediate discussion among people intrigued at the prospect of artists performing and promoting others to voluntarily take on municipal tasks.

The mailbox was a suggested site for inspiring civic DIY urbanism in a selected Moscow district. By definition, DIY urbanism refers to the local and temporary, but can be made more strategic –

in the form of Tactical Urbanism, an idea established by Mike Lydon which has become a widespread planning movement in North America. These interventions were quick to implement, easy to conceptualise and inexpensive for us to execute. They were also, as is the case with most direct DIY urban actions, relegated to a small, but manageable scale. As a result, the collective was commissioned to design, implement and collaborate on a broader, long-term community project.

These unsanctioned, ephemeral and spontaneous interventions spurred a collaborative civic project: *Cooperative Urbanism* (which ran from June–August 2012), in which people installed mailboxes to gather place-making suggestions and also sought to involve the elderly and youth/children in place-making activities. *Cooperative Urbanism* built upon notions of DIY urbanism, and offered individuals and communities an opportunity for inclusive, sustained and meaningful civic engagement and space for contributing urban activism. From a research point of view, it was effective because it built on a widely and well-established letter-writing tradition in Russia, where people are generally highly educated and take pride in their revolutionary past: i.e. are more likely to be aware and engaged on political issues, and have proof from history of being able create absolute change, to reform the existing inadequacies of a system through their actions. The following letter is an example of what we received, and signals what happens when trying to involve people in place-making processes:

'There is neither a supermarket nor a grocery store next to the Pyatnitskoe highway building 23, Mitino district. Locals have to go buy food and groceries in other districts, which is not comfortable and is time consuming after work. Thank you for your attention. We suggest inexpensive supermarkets – smaller, informal and not very expensive ones. PS: next to us the construction of a high-rise apartment building is in progress, so this problem is going to become more complicated.' (A letter dated July 12th, 2012, as part of *Cooperative Urbanism*)

The project resulted in many useful suggestions, revealed a lot of competing priorities and brought to the fore much unintended complexity which reflected the reality of the local experience. While our interventions tried to make statements at and provoke a reaction from city authorities, we were suddenly tasked with organising budgets, mediating conflicting interests, moderating discussions and even trying to convince people of individual practices. This prospect of mediating not just multiple interests and points of view, but also being faced with vested social or even political interests, was a challenge.

Based on this experience, it again seems that the artist is more effective as a catalyst and not necessarily as an enactor of policy. There are risks and challenges that emerge, including that communities may be used on a whim by the artists or even that public realm place-making may manipulate culture to frame space. While this intervention series demonstrates that perhaps direct action is the best way of creating and prolonging a discourse that is currently non-existent, the *Cooperative Urbanism* project was an experiment with exactly the opposite form: sanctioned, collaborative, involving professionals, authorities, planners, architecture students, and activists.

There are many positive and negative aspects to these kinds of public realm artistic projects but I think the greatest challenge is managing many different opinions and expressions without trying to judge or censor them. The mailboxes were in essence place-making suggestion boxes for a community in which people lack freedom of expression, were experiencing a development upsurge, and had a tradition of letter writing to use as a method of articulating local concerns. Outcomes are often unintended and it is difficult to control or even mediate people's desires. Fortunately or unfortunately, creating a dialogue or a discourse in the public realm gives voice not only to positive but also to negative sentiments, by providing an equal and anonymous opportunity for bigots, racists and xenophobes to express themselves. For example, several letters and comments were received

in Mitino online, which focused on the removal of migrants, whose informal shops or food vending were described as dirty, smelly and offensive – as their most valued local improvement. The aims of the artist and of the community being worked in may not always match, and this is something to recognise when implementing such projects. This perhaps speaks mostly to the nature of the commons: that it is not uni-dimensional or one-sided, it gets messy, and it generates a conflict of views and of opinions. And often, these may be in direct opposition to the sentiments and views of the artists.

Ultimately, although artists can bring a guiding sensitivity and uncover aspects of city living that are uncomfortable or difficult to address, they may not be equipped to effectively address these issues. In fact, they are definitely not able to.

In the initial creative phase of *Cooperative Urbanism* there was a wide degree of perceived trust by the community in the process and its outcome. However, this tended to fade away once cultural institutions were introduced into the project. In positing oneself in the public realm, artists need to be aware of not only being the recipient of accolades, but also of criticism and difficult discussions – sometimes even violence and destruction. Several of our mailboxes were vandalised and broken into, for instance. This perhaps offers an interesting insight into a people-based process of engagement. Cooperative Urbanism and its implementation challenged my view of 'participation' from an ideal of joyfully transforming urban space, in which people work towards a consensus, to one that was sometimes more 'nightmarish.' Dealing with multiple interests in a local context, and on issues of ownership, citizenship and urban planning, can be a messy and difficult proposition. It is inherently political, even if one does not intend to be that – and personally I don't think it should be that. It also involves much responsibility which as someone with limited language ability and perceived as an outsider led to many difficult obstacles to face.

The subsequent experience of the collective collaborating with municipal authorities and the architectural education organization, *Strelka Institute* to replicate interventions and actions arguably diminished the momentum of unsanctioned and spontaneous action. Systemization transforms the work and often attributes non-existent or subtle political leanings. There is a difference in commissioning research that is performative and in artistic acts as performance – which means there is a difference between sanctioning, for instance, a cycling project, and being commissioned or funded by a cultural or municipal organization to replicate the same actions elsewhere. Additionally, a self-motivated work is likely to be viewed less sceptically than something with a lot of support – which is why projects where we created signs or maps as expressions of interest or of our opinion, rather than anything more than that, were more successful. The idea for drawing up a new Moscow metro map in January 2012, for instance, emerged out of a desire to promote walking, cycling and integrated mass transit. With some crowdsourced funding for printing it was an easy project, with few strings attached, and generated widespread discussion. Spontaneous artistic action is perhaps more useful as a catalyst or even as an anonymous statement, but when projects get commissioned, and artists are assigned more responsibilities in the manner of work, the aims – and accompanying restrictions – may transform the impact and attribute unintended politics or functions. These are some risks inherent in working in the public realm, of which artists should be aware. It seems therefore that one of the greatest risks to the concerned artists are being stereotyped and typecast.

Everything is Connected: Can Artists Make the Road by Walking?

While civic street art can respond to problems generated in the neoliberal city in a way that catalyses younger people and also the elderly – on issues including ecological degradation in the form of rampant pollution, traffic jams, isolation and increased loneliness due to the breaking up of traditional family units, the loss of traditional

knowledge and forms of agriculture or craft traditions – reflecting on limitations, difficulties and failure also provides insight into the eternal yet evolving question: what is the role of art in society?

In terms of the impact of such projects, I think that artists should be supported such that the basics are met i.e. in the form of a salary, material support to create, collaborate and share ideas with others – in a manner that does not compromise independent integrity. Cross-cultural, local and even cross-national experiences benefit from one another, and by focusing on the aims of process and on the empowerment of the artist, instead of on the output, the art is often more authentic to the artist and to the place it is being created in. I think there is a lot of value in looking at or considering the artist and the artworks as unique and masterful, instead of mass production. There is value in raising awareness rather than simply creating an acceptable outcome.

Artists are not exactly policymakers, but art and culture projects hold valuable insight for policymakers. *Cooperative Urbanism*, as an experiment in working with cultural institutions, activists, urban policymakers and local authorities, teaches numerous lessons. Institutional involvement for artists must be carefully negotiated and considered: ensuring translators, negotiations of responsibility for materials and ensuring that the artists' visions are not compromised by restraints of time etc. Urban policymakers could be more involved in the pre- and post-project discussion with stakeholders as a means of evaluating with the artists; local authorities might sanction activities, but, as suggested, it is less useful when they are explicitly involved and more useful to simply be sanctioned by them with minimal involvement. In our case, the progressive deputies in Moscow districts were helpful in allowing our work and encouraging the community to get involved, but this also resulted in unprecedented responsibility for us in the guise of being "experts". Overall I would say that just the project in itself as a novel idea and form of creative engagement was transformative as an art intervention.

Artists can inspire and facilitate civic action and discourse in the public realm through creative interventions directly (in the form of unsanctioned repairs, city maintenance and beautification), indirectly (via public discussion and discourse: letter-writing, surveys, happenings and organised events/festivals), and, sometimes, inadvertently. Some attempt to disrupt and disorient in response to the spectacle, while others contribute to a sense of connectivity, local community and shared responsibility. Ultimately, results and reactions to these forms of art may be surprising and unintended. But perhaps that is the risk that goes along with art in the city: 'Utopias and dystopias can exist side by side. Everyone's shining city on a hill is someone else's hell on earth'. If everyone is an artist, everyone is free to shape their city in the manner they wish through their everyday living and actions resulting in public discussion and enactment of conflicts of interest which can then be publicly resolved.

In my view, the role of the artist is to be a gentle yet persuasive critic, to bring back what government and business take away, to refocus, to protect, and to challenge any and all inappropriate restrictions to expression, speech and life. The role of the artist, or of the arts, cannot, and should not, perpetuate intolerance isolation, inequality or extreme forms of politics. Indeed, the role of the artist is perhaps to respond and creatively address such issues: to be the voice of reason, the independent authority, of freedom, an enactment of civil society – unbound by the restrictions of space, but motivated to address the things that are overlooked or invisible but need to be worked on.

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