

NEW PUBLIC ART AND THE CHILD-FRIENDLY CITY

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the role of children in the so-called new public art using the example of the Admission Free Festival, the central project of the Art Society of Celje. We reflect on the position that this autogenous collective project has taken in the local environment of Celje, Slovenia, in relation to the needs of children. One of the strengths of the festival lies in its appreciation of various alternative forms of artistic creation, thinking, and acting, as well as in its use of urban public space. Using the conceptual tools of philosophy, aesthetics, social theory, and critical art theory, we focus on those artistic manifestations that involve children and help us to rethink childhood in the context of urban life in today's city.

The festival offers socially engaged art outside of institutions, flexible enough to respond to the rapid changes in society and to create and make visible different situations in urban space. The festival demonstrates a subtle ability to raise awareness of various problematic aspects of the urban present in relation to specific urban places and their genius loci. The self-organized format, the rejection of aesthetic formalism, the application of the principle of "do it yourself" or "let us do it together", and the emphasis on playfulness and an open and accessible public space are the main features of the festival. Some urban interventions and installations are a kind of service that helps to raise awareness and perhaps alleviate problems in the community (proposals for alternative spatial planning, green areas, communal practices related to various recreational and leisure opportunities and socialization in the city center, safe and creative use of the city park, etc.). In the "play impulse" of the festival, we recognize the legacy of Schiller's aesthetic education and also a model for social and subjective change.

KEYWORDS: *urban public space, contemporary art, aesthetic education, children's play, playground activism, the Admission Free Festival*

Introduction

In examining the emergence of the so-called "new public art" (Bast, 2015; cf. Lacy, 1995: "new genre public art"), we use the example of the Admission Free Festival, the central project of the Art Society of Celje (Admission Free Festival, 2023; DLUC,

2005). We also refer to some related projects, especially with regard to the inclusion of children in contemporary public art (Nielsen, 1968, in Larsen, 2010). In the public space of the city center of Celje (Slovenia), the festival has manifested itself for more than twenty years through artistic actions, interventions, performances, and installations that bear witness to “urban contemporaneity” as a globalized phenomenon (Krasny, 2014) from the viewpoint of activating existing spaces or discovering interspaces, a kind of Foucauldian heterotopias, “counter-sites” of lively eventfulness and binding performativity. With the concept of heterotopias, we can address privileged places or spaces of deviation, otherness, exteriority, heterogeneity, and so on as kind of “counter-sites” to the authoritarian spaces of normalization and homogenization (Foucault, 1997; cf. Lefebvre, 1991). Among the initial ideas of the festival is the claim that art can live outside of art institutions, which raises an important question about the social function and political potential of art (Adorno, 2002; Rancière, 2009), to which we return below.

The Admission Free Festival was created on the initiative of the artist Franc Purg, initially based on the observation of the urban environment, and then on the need to free the artistic activity of local artists from the formal institution of fine art. The work *Dinosaur* from 1998 in the City Park (Fig. 1) was a prelude to the Admission Free Festival and became part of it in 1999. This playground action was the artist’s response to the lack of playground equipment for children in the city, recalling at the same time the duplicity of the regulation of public space, which is subjected to economic rather than social interests.



FIGURE 1. *Franc Purg, Dinosaur, 1998*

The work can be seen as an example of playground activism and urban critique. This type of art practice has been on the rise since the late 1960s (e.g., the playground activism of the Danish artist Palle Nielsen, which Lars Bang Larsen, an internationally renowned critic and curator, has written about – see Larsen, 2010, 2014). With the construction of playground equipment, Purg aimed to constructively criticize urban planning. Purg wanted to address the problem of urban space through transformative action in the form of (illegal)¹ public space improvement. The community was encouraged to recognize that the construction of a children’s playground met a need that had not been previously identified for that location. The location where the playground action took place was an urban space where there was still room for (in)formal change. Five years later, an official playground was set up there (see Purg, 2012).

In recent years, the festival has focused on specific themes that seemed important to artists and that might also be relevant in the local urban environment and in the broader society, such as *Sex in the City* (2007), *Forbidden* (2008), *Intolerance* (2009), *Sound* (2010), *Home* (2011), *Community* (2012), *Selfness* (2013), and *Light* (2016).² Even this rough outline shows a subtle ability to raise awareness of various problematic aspects of the urban present in relation to specific urban places and their *genius loci*. The festival regularly addresses the specifics of Celje, where, as in other Slovenian cities, the crisis of capitalist public space has become increasingly evident since the beginning of Slovenia’s independence in 1991. As in any post-industrial city, an “abstract space” (Lefebvre, 1991) thrives here, primarily at the service of accelerated consumption and the invention of ever new marketing strategies that permeate every pore of urban life. Local and community-oriented artworks are particularly vulnerable to political and economic instrumentalization.

The role of children and play in art: The case of the Admission Free Festival

One area that has not yet been highlighted, but is nevertheless present, is the inclusion of children in festival events, that is, the contribution of participating artists

¹ The action itself was illegal: the artist made a ride-on dinosaur on his own initiative in a place where children usually play and where he felt a playground was needed. Fortunately, the action was well received by the people and the media (personal correspondence between the author and the artist, 10. 4. 2024).

² Each year, the festival focuses on a specific theme – we have mentioned those related to the social space of the city. The festival has also dealt with more psychological aspects of society, such as shame (2014) and intimate experiences of the individual (*Desire, Passion, and Expectations*, 2017); in 2018, the festival was dedicated to the deceased artist Adolf Mljač, and the theme of the 20th anniversary was *A Look Back* (2019).

to the reflection on the role of children in contemporary (public) art. How does contemporary art enter into dialogue with children? The festival offers some answers to this through an artistic exploration of urban public space and the role of children in it.

The first gesture was the aforementioned playground activism of Franc Purg, while Andreja Džakušič also made an important contribution to emphasize the role of the child in urban public space. An eloquent example of this are her projects *Picnic on the Grass* (2004), to which we will return below, *Celje, My City* (2005), and *Cel'e 'as a Deaf Ear* (2010). In the city park, the artist, together with her son, marked the dog feces they found with small flags bearing the Celje coat of arms and a sign with the title of the action: *Celje, My City*. During her performance in public space, *Cel'e 'as a Def Ear*, the artist mimes singing (she only opens her mouth) from a songbook of Slovenian love songs. In this artistic gesture, one can recognize a critique of municipal institutions responsible for regulating the problematic aspects of life in the city – including the needs of children. The artist is characterized by an autobiographical exploration of the role of a woman artist in society, including the role of a mother and her care for her children and family (Čerčnik, 2013).³ Also worth mentioning is the contribution of Estela Žutić and Gilles Duvivier, e.g., their *Provolution Action* (2005–) (Fig. 2), in which the search for edible plants in the city was accompanied by workshops for children.



FIGURE 2. Estela Žutić & Gilles Duvivier, *Provolution Action*, 2005–(to be continued)

³ Care has recently become an important topic in contemporary art, as well as in feminist theory and practice of curating (see e.g., Krasny and Perry, 2023) – in this context, we mention it only as a promising topic with regard to rethinking childhood in the context of contemporary public art.

In general, the presence of children and the principle of play (including elements of board games, dance, pantomime, etc.), which is primarily the domain of children, can be recognized in projects of various authors (DLUC, 2005) (Fig. 3).



FIGURE 3. *Simon Macuh, This Is Not a Political Action!, 2012*

There are various, often contradictory perspectives on play as a biological, cultural, or social phenomenon, as well as theoretical positions that locate play within aesthetics (Zimma, 2014). Play, as an activity familiar to everyone, is often used as a point of reference or metaphor, without awareness of its complex connotations. This paper therefore combines the perspective of philosophy, sociology, theory of art, and history to create a multi-layered picture of play and its interpretation in the context of public art.

The child and its play is not only a metaphor for innocence, happiness, and so on, but also a model for social and subjective change. In the influential text *On the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (1793), Friedrich Schiller describes *der Spieltrieb*, or the “play impulse”, as a fundamental aesthetic element in the creation of authentic social communities – it is the essential factor in the establishment of a harmonious social order (Schiller 2004). In the 20th-century art, the ludic is privileged by historical avant-gardes (especially Dada and Surrealism). Furthermore, play also inspired the Situationist International, for example, while members of the American counterculture, who called themselves “flower children”, appropriated the concept of play as a sensual rupture with normality – the ludic and children’s play are recognized here as socio-poetic forces.

Post-war humanism took into account the unique position of the child, and thus an aesthetic and philosophical concept of childhood, and the ludic transcended the previous historical line. For art, this had two effects: (1) artistic movements such as Art Brut and COBRA emphasized the creativity of the child; (2) childhood was no longer

considered as an eternal poetic truth, but as a political issue where the child became one of subaltern subjects (Larsen, 2010). In order to develop their specific form of sensuality, “children require a public sphere that is more spatially conceived than do adults. They require more rooms in which to move, places that represent as flexible as possible a field of action, where things are not fixed once and for all, defined, furnished with names, laden with prohibitions” (Kluge and Negt, 1993, in Larsen, 2010: 39). The public sphere of children represents an oppositional dynamic that cannot be isolated (on the contrary, in Johan Huizinga’s seminal work *Homo Ludens*, 1949, play is understood as suspended and isolated from real life).

In recent years, many artists have returned to the themes of childhood, education, learning, and play. This has been accompanied by a reorientation of teaching and pedagogy toward a more holistic view of the child – on the part of cultural institutions and schools, the playful creativity of the child now becomes the object and starting point of socialization, and this can be understood as a legacy of Schiller (cf. Larsen, 2010). Contemporary approaches to early childhood learning also practice new methods with the elements of play (e.g., gamification, immersion, and storytelling) in the light of new findings in the field of educational science. In general, learning in childhood often takes place through play, puppetry, storytelling (fairy tales etc.), movement, stage play, and cross-curricular integration. Play as an artistic medium is also a tool of aesthetic education.

Artistic affirmation of play as a way of aesthetic education

Friendship, hospitality, and playfulness are the common thread of the Admission Free Festival (Kapaš 2005). Derrida rightly wonders whether, in order to:

...offer hospitality, is it necessary to start from the certain existence of a dwelling, or is it rather only starting from the dislocation of the shelterless, the homeless, that the authenticity of hospitality can open up? (Dufourmantelle & Derrida, 2000: 56)

Hospitality is inextricably linked to feelings of homeliness, warmth, and safe closeness. In the context of the festival, this can only be offered “here and now”, with small gestures like culinary treats and a cozy space that create an ambience for a collective art experience. For example, the artist Andreja Džakušič spread blankets, with the words “Admission Free” (*Vstop prost* in Slovene, as shown in the next figure) written on them, across the green areas and invited people to join the picnic in the park, accompanied by props to play with (board games, badminton, toys, etc.) – an offer that



FIGURE 4. *Andreja Džakušič, Picnic on the Grass, event, 2004*

was open both to children and adults (Andreja Džakušič, Admission Free Festival, 2004 – Fig. 4; Čerčnik, 2013).

Through hospitable and playful gestures, the festival offers visitors something unexpected and intangible in an ambivalent and sometimes difficult relationship between art and the public space of downtown Celje. This could be related to Rancière’s concept of “distribution of the sensible”, which for him means:

...the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. [...] This appointment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. (Rancière, 2004: 12)

An example of a kind of subversive distribution of the sensible is an artistic event that disrupts the usual distribution of the sensible in public space by adding an element of the unexpected. Such artistic gestures can sometimes be viewed from a political perspective – indeed, according to Rancière, politics is not the exercise of state authority or the organization of power (he describes this as the work of the police), but an intervention in the existing social fabric, and tends to redistribute the sensible in a way of “dissensus” – the opposite of consensus – that “creates a fissure in the sensible order by confronting the established framework of perception, thought, and action with the ‘inadmissible,’ i.e. a political subject” (2015: 85). Such an aesthetic action

is more than just a change of perspective, for it is about establishing a kind of antagonistic relationship that is subject to a radical Otherness that cannot be reduced, for example, to the divisions of identity within the existing urban community.⁴

An example of such Otherness is also the child at play and its role in urban public space and society at large. Larsen gives one of his essays the telling title “History’s Intimate Others: The Child and Its Play in Contemporary Art”, in which he writes “[T]he child is an Other who is barely graspable by the artwork, but whose gaze rests upon culture” (Larsen, 2014: 247).

The Admission Free Festival offers socially engaged art outside of institutions that is flexible enough to respond to the rapid changes in society and make visible the most diverse situations in the cityscape. Here, the emancipatory politics of art itself is revealed, which does not refer to the autonomy of art or aesthetic autonomy within state art institutions. According to Rancière, the process of emancipation consists in the “polemical verification of equality” (2004: 86). In his aesthetic regime of art, Rancière emphasizes the tension between autonomy and heteronomy of art: “Art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or something other than art” (2009: 36). From this perspective, the Admission Free Festival is an affirmative gesture of play within the realm of relatively autonomous and emancipatory artistic creativity, which is always heteronomous in terms of its involvement in a complex and unpredictable social and public sphere. The artistic self-affirmation of the local urban identity in its spontaneity, playfulness, and openness reveals its true meaning in Celje as a specific form of aesthetic education.

Playground and green activism in Celje for a child-friendly city

In a major wave of theory in the 1990s, in both humanities and social sciences, the so-called spatial turn initiated theoretical reflection on the meaning of space in the present, and reinforced the theoretically supported analysis of space as a social

⁴ The concept of the other/Other is widely used in a variety of disciplines, from philosophy, especially phenomenology, to psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory. Although the meaning of the term varies widely, it generally refers to one pole of the relationship between a subject and a person or thing that is defined or constituted as a non-self that is other or different. Lacan frequently uses the concepts of other and Other – to describe two modalities of otherness (1978); the big Other, in contrast to other as a projection of the subject, refers to the symbolic and to language. The other, defined in a slightly different but not unrelated sense, is also an important theme in postcolonial theory. In this context, the term refers to the discursive production of an other (cf. Macey, 2001: 285-86). In a related sense, our understanding of the child as Other is also an attempt to mark the adult/rational/capitalist control over the means of communication and the interpretation of public space that is called into question in the observed examples of new public art.

category. Along with Michel Foucault (1997), spatial thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre (1991) (the production of space) and Michel de Certeau (1984) (the space of everyday practices) are important harbingers of the spatial turn. Relational and performative aspects have an increasingly important role in the study of spatial and social relations, as well as space and identity. The temporal dimension in relation to space is emphasized, to which the eventfulness of new public art, as practiced by the Admission Free Festival, makes an important contribution. As such, artistic events of the festival are considered as particular “critical spatial practices” in reflection on the site-specificity of the city center of Celje, to use the expression of the British architecture and art theorist Jane Rendell (2008). These critical practices grow out of resistance to neoliberal approaches to a globalized urban contemporaneity, and test alternative modes of functioning, including “spatial formations for children” (Palle Nielsen’s term – in Larsen 2010: 40). As Deleuze notes eloquently: “There is never a moment when children are not already plunged into an actual milieu in which they are moving about, and in which the parents as persons simply play the role of openers of doors, guardians of thresholds, connectors or disconnectors of zones” (Deleuze, 1997: 62).

Parallel to Deleuze’s description of the child’s agency in spatial terms, the activist tenet of the production of space became an important component of anti-authoritarian views of the child in the late 1960s. However, children today are taken over by consumerism, mass media, repressive institutions, and a dysfunctional urban space (Larsen, 2010).

Occasionally, artists focus on urban dynamics that include contemporary forms of marginalization related to migration, unemployment, age, and other reasons and forms of social exclusion. To this list, we can add children. We have already mentioned the lack of playground equipment for children in the city, while the regulation of public space is subjected to economic rather than social interests.

At this point, artists approach Rancière’s understanding of political activity in the narrow sense of uniting those who have no right to speak, as an articulation of those whose voices do not count, or as a demonstration of primordial inequality, of excluded labor, of the “part of those who have no part” in the political community (1999: 9). This reveals an important dissensual starting point for festival art, which in its self-interrogation is willing to stand up for the “outside”, the “Other”, not only for itself but also for a wider social environment. More than in the aesthetic appearance of the chosen art form, artists are interested in how this form manages to approach social space. In doing so, the models of participation with which artists question aspects of urban life and experiment with alternatives to life are tested anew with each project.

We refer to the festival’s projects that are process-oriented, participatory, or interactive; that are performance-based; that use art objects as props or environments for

children's play; or that use children's play as a model for artistic creation. Some of the Admission Free Festival projects are reminiscent of the roots of the activist struggle for the right to the city (see Puncer, 2015).

What is a child-friendly city according to the UNICEF Child Friendly City initiative? "In practice, it is a city, town or community in which the voices, needs, priorities, and rights of children are an integral part of public policies, programmes and decisions" (UNICEF). Every child has the right to grow up in an environment where they can play, learn, and grow, and where their voice is heard and counts. A child-friendly city is the one where children participate in cultural, civic/community, and social life, live in a safe and clean environment with access to green spaces, and have places to play and have fun, among other things. Moreover, children themselves also play an important role in building child-friendly cities (UNICEF) (Fig. 5).



FIGURE 5. *A child's proposal for a playground (photo: Franc Purg)*

For an urban space to provide optimal living conditions in a given crisis situation, its inhabitants must think and act sustainably, strive for dynamic equilibrium and coexistence, persistently develop a consumer ethic and a unique ecology of mind and body in an increasingly limited space. In an abstract, alienated urban space, it is therefore necessary to expand interspaces or invent new spaces that are anchored in reality and utopian at the same time, or better yet – heterotopian “counter-sites” for which the in-between, the openness to multidimensional encounters, intersections, and mergers are constitutive.

Such interspaces are both material and discursive, often functioning as heterotopic, parallel, “other” spaces in the sense of Foucault or Lefebvre, which can be unsettling and contradictory, constantly changing, increasing in intensity, and so on (see Puncer, 2018). As worlds within the everyday world, they simultaneously reflect, co-create, and stimulate what lies outside of them. This is not necessarily about materially delin-

eated other spaces, but about the immanent otherness of “non-places” (Augé, 1997) created through art. In this context, the term is understood in terms of the gap between everyday functioning and such non-places of art. Children’s play also falls into this category. According to Larsen, “[t]o base a social model in a playground is to give a heterotopia a utopian superstructure” (Larsen, 2010: 85).

Conclusion

The Admission Free Festival can be seen as a response to the widespread opinion that public art is an important part of everyday urban life. However, the usual understanding of public art is often quite traditional, if not conservative. Today, one can speak of a new public art, which in many forms is not created by public support “from the top down”, but by local community initiatives “from the bottom up”.

It is really fascinating how the festival has been operating more or less independently and outside the mainstream of the art world for more than twenty years. This also means that the principle of autonomy of the artistic community (in Adorno’s sense: cf. Adorno, 2002: esp. 225–254) is constantly put to the test, as the festival takes place under self-defined conditions and in this way, implements its own politics and critique of the heteronomy of art institutions.

The festival as a whole can be seen as long-term artistic research *in situ*. The project questions the common concepts of local and at the same time globalized urbanity, and represents a valuable reflection on the artistic experience in public space in Slovenia, which could be related to some similar forms of artistic articulation in urban public space in other parts of Europe and around the world (e.g., the Admission Free Festival is in several ways comparable to the Zagreb UrbanFestival – see Hanaček & Kutleša 2016). Heterotopic, self-managed art spaces, collective projects, and local communities can achieve improvements in the present and shake up the *status quo* of local (urban) politics (cf. Kosmaoglou 2012). City dwellers create their own spatial fictions – including children’s play – by inventing ecological solutions to life and weaving a web of inventive, mobile, and sometimes impossible connections. The contribution of art, as made by the Admission Free Festival, which uses its own resources to promote greater mental and physical openness in the city’s public space, should not be neglected or overlooked on the art scene and in the field of artistic and/or aesthetic education. This includes projects for children and adults that are based on children’s play as an impulse or even model, not only for artistic creation (play as a creative strategy or tactic in 20th- and 21st-century art) but also for society as a whole, which can be understood as a unique echo of Schiller’s legacy in today’s world.

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NOVA JAVNA UMJETNOST I GRAD PRIJATELJ DJECE

Sažetak

U ovom članku ispitujemo ulogu djece u tzv. novoj javnoj umjetnosti na primjeru Festivala bez ulaza, središnjeg projekta Likovnog društva Celje. Razmišljamo o poziciji koju je ovaj autogeni kolektivni projekt zauzeo u lokalnoj sredini Celja, Slovenija, u odnosu na potrebe djece. Jedna od prednosti festivala leži u uvažavanju različitih alternativnih oblika umjetničkog stvaranja, mišljenja i djelovanja, kao i korištenja urbanoga javnog prostora. Koristeći se konceptualnim alatima filozofije, estetike, društvene teorije i kritičke teorije umjetnosti, usredotočeni smo na one umjetničke manifestacije koje uključuju djecu i pomažu nam promisliti djetinjstvo u kontekstu urbanog života u današnjem gradu.

Festival nudi društveno angažiranu umjetnost izvan institucija, dovoljno fleksibilnu da odgovori na brze promjene u društvu te da kreira i učini vidljivim različite situacije u urbanom prostoru. Festival pokazuje suptilnu sposobnost osvještavanja različitih problematičnih aspekata urbane sadašnjosti u odnosu na specifična urbana mjesta i njihov *genius loci*. Samoorganizirani format, odbacivanje estetskog formalizma, primjena načela „uradi sam“ ili „uradimo zajedno“ te naglasak na razigranosti i otvorenom i pristupačnom javnom prostoru glavna su obilježja festivala. Neke urbane intervencije i instalacije svojevrсни su servisi koji pomažu u osvještavanju, a možda i ublažavanju problema u zajednici (prijedlozi alternativnog uređenja prostora, zelenih površina, komunalnih praksi povezanih s raznim rekreacijskim mogućnostima te socijalizacijom u središtu grada, sigurnim i kreativnim korištenjem gradskog parka i sl.). U „impulsu igre“ festivala prepoznajemo nasljeđe Schillerova estetskog obrazovanja, ali i model za društvenu i subjektivnu promjenu.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *urbani javni prostor, suvremena umjetnost, estetski odgoj, dječja igra, aktivizam na igralištu, Festival bez ulaza*