

## Spaces of democracy: art, politics, and activism in the post-socialist city

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# Spaces of Democracy

## Art, Politics, and Artivism in the Post-socialist City

ZORAN POPOSKI

The establishment of a certain space in the city as “public” is a reminder, a warning, that the rest of the city isn’t public.  
(VITO ACCONCI, *Public Space in a Private Time*)

### *Introduction*

As a space available – at least nominally – for all citizens to enjoy and use, public space is the location where social identity is formed and represented, the stage where social practices take place, and in its broader meaning of the “public sphere” it is where “the public” gets organized, represented, and imagined. Public space is the space where individuals see and are seen by others as they engage in public affairs and is thus a necessary precondition for “public freedom” (Hannah Arendt).

As a space for representation, public space is of crucial importance. For a world defined exclusively by private property necessarily precludes any existence of a public sphere which would be inclusive and broadly representative of a variety of different publics. As an arena of political debate and participation, the public sphere is fundamental to democratic governance. It is the arena where the public organizes itself, formulates public opinion, and expresses its interests and desires in relation to the government. Focused on rational critical argumentation and on the exercise of reason, in Habermas’ model the quality of the public sphere and its contribution to democracy depend on two factors: the quality of discourse (rational reasoning and argumentation), as well as on the quantity of citizen participation (level of involvement in public affairs)<sup>1</sup>. The central tenet of Habermas’ ideal – a power-free public sphere – is the idea of *consensus*, rationally and freely attained among participants in the public sphere. However, in her discussion on the kind of public sphere required by a truly democratic society, Chantal Mouffe criticizes the privileging of consensus over confrontation among diverse democratic political identities. Not only does every consensus exist as a “temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and... always entails some form of exclusion”<sup>2</sup>, but also the project of arriving at a consensus without exclusion implies “the eradication of the political”<sup>3</sup> and “displacement of politics by morality and law”<sup>4</sup>.

For Mouffe, antagonism is inherent in human relations and is at the heart of the political realm. Arguing that the tendency for consensus and the avoiding of confrontation leads to apathy and lack of political participation, Mouffe underlines

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<sup>1</sup> Craig CALHOUN, “Introduction”, in IDEM (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Chantal MOUFFE, *Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London, 2000, p.104.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> IDEM, “Which Public Sphere for a Democratic Society”, *Theoria*, no 99, June 2002, p. 56.

the “integrative role” played by conflict in modern society and that consensus must be accompanied by dissent. While there should be consensus on the institutions which are constitutive of democracy and on the values that underlie any form of political association, “there will always be disagreement concerning the meaning of those values and the way they should be implemented”<sup>1</sup>. Instead of consensus, Mouffe argues for the radical democratic model of “agonistic pluralism”, where all antagonisms could be expressed and the role of power relations in society is acknowledged, along with the ever present possibility of antagonism.

The increasing commodification of public space and control over it (either in its direct forms of policing and surveillance, or indirectly through architecture and urban planning) leads to a redefining of the whole concept of public space. Creating spaces of order, leisure and spectacle in which every interaction is carefully planned out, it precludes the possibility of unmediated social interaction which is so important to democracy, and leads to greater control over the production and use of public space. When commercial interests gain too much influence over public space, the ultimate result is a destruction of the sense of shared ownership of that space (that it belongs to the people) and an erosion of civic identity. Furthermore, public interaction becomes carefully planned, mediated, and commodified.

As a result, contemporary urban public space is a hybrid of diminishing political representation and heightened commercial interest. Unlike in the agora where it was both a place of commerce and politics, politics has been nearly banished from public spaces at the expense of the market.

In the countries of former Eastern Europe, the collapse of socialism and the subsequent onset of neoliberal capitalism have resulted in a massive transfiguration of urban public space at the hands of commercial interests. Examples include the proliferation of outdoor advertising that destroys the character of natural and historic urban landscapes, commercial events that restrict access to parks and squares, the design of retail kiosks and that does not respect the local context sending a signal that it no longer represents the local community. Instead of a free interaction, without the coercion of state institutions - the productive, constantly remade, democratic public space – there is space for recreation and entertainment where access is limited only to suitable members of the public: “A controlled and orderly retreat where a properly behaved public might experience the spectacle of the city” (Mitchell). The image of the public created by this pseudo-public space is of a passive and receptive community, where the potentially dangerous social heterogeneity of the multitude has been homogenized. The public is turned into the ideal consumer, and public space is thus reduced to a commodity, privatized by commercial interest.

### *Public Space: Definition and Functions*

Public space is a highly complex and multifaceted notion that covers a wide variety of social locations, ranging from the street to the Internet, from the park to the media, from the neighborhood to global institutions and international markets. As such, it touches upon many disciplines, including geography, architecture, history, political economy, urbanism, anthropology, etc. Public space is commonly defined

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 58.

as a place (or space) created and maintained by public authority, and accessible to all citizens for their use and enjoyment. From the earliest notions dating back to Greek antiquity, public space is almost always urban space. This is reflected in many contemporary theoretical deliberations of public space, where cities remain the focus of analysis.

The characteristics of public space can be summed up in the following way. Defined by a process of exclusion based on race, gender, class, sexuality, age, disability, the public space is structured and delimited by law (becoming increasingly regulated and policed). It represents a ground for political action as a site of protest for the labor movement, women's rights, sexual liberation, and racial equality, and also acts as ceremonial staging grounds for the state to display its power in. Finally, it serves as a gathering place, a space of sociability<sup>1</sup>.

This dialectics of access and exclusion, law and custom, power and protest is one of the defining features of public space which is constantly produced through "a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, order and disorder, rationality and irrationality, violence and peaceful dissent"<sup>2</sup>.

Even though public space is generally conceived as more or less open to public participation, it is not free of regulation. On the contrary, regulation and control are one of its key features: it is defined by the "rules of access, source and nature of control over entry to a space, individual and collective behavior sanctioned in specific spaces and rules of use"<sup>3</sup>. Through this dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, by granting access to certain social groups and depriving others, thus rendering them invisible, public space constructs "the public".

Public spaces are sites of interaction and encounter (in the street, the square, the park) as well as places of interchange and communication. As spaces for popular use and areas shared by all citizens, they are the primary source of local identity. Public space is a space for representation, where heterogeneous social groups openly assert their identity, but, since it is also by definition a space of exclusion, this representation (and the right to it) has to be continuously reasserted. It is in public spaces that political movements become visible – they represent themselves to a larger audience not only to attract supporters but also to reclaim visibility because only by becoming visible do they stand a chance to be counted as legitimate members of society. That's why the right to mass in public space has always been one of the key demands of political movements. It is where political dissent becomes visible and gains momentum, as well as is regulated and policed. As Mitchell recalls, "by claiming space in public, by creating public spaces, social groups themselves become public"<sup>4</sup>, because public space should always be viewed in close relation to movements for social justice. It is the struggle for rights that produces public space.

Public space is a space where excluded groups rise up to demand legitimacy within the public, i.e. it is a deeply political space. The streets are the place where

<sup>1</sup> See Don MITCHELL, Lynn A. STAEHEL, "Clean and Safe? Property Redevelopment, Public Space, and Homelessness in Downtown San Diego", in Setha LOW, Neil SMITH (eds), *The Politics of Public Space*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 144.

<sup>2</sup> Don MITCHELL, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, Guilford Press, New York, 2003, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Setha LOW, Neil SMITH, "Introduction: The imperative of public space", in IDEM (eds), *The Politics of Public...cit*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Don MITCHELL, *The Right to the City...cit*, p. 129.

antiwar activists protest the bloodshed in Iraq, where labor unions demand better working conditions. They are also the loci of the homeless, the only place where they become visible.

### *Privatization of Public Space and Visual Pollution in A Post-Socialist City: The Case of Skopje*

As an illustration, in Macedonia's capital Skopje, the uncontrolled spread of outdoor advertising has created problems so serious that the city authorities were at one point considering banning huge billboards around the city square and reducing their number in the streets near the center of the city, moving most of them to the periphery (which, in itself, is a move loaded with issues of social inequality). However, this has not happened yet.

My research showed that billboard licenses were granted through a tender process. The last one apparently took place in 2003, with five-year licences awarded to two companies, Eurolinija and Akcent Media, for a total of 400 billboards. However, that number has obviously been surpassed. In recent years the estimation concerning the number of billboards by the city authorities<sup>1</sup> was of over 600.

Most billboards are located on the main streets, primarily in the centre of the city. The proliferation of billboards can be attributed to – among other things – the low fee advertisers pay for their placement. The city tax fee for putting a billboard is less than forty US dollars per year<sup>2</sup> – the price of a one-day black-and-white ad in a daily newspaper in Macedonia! On the other hand, the price of renting a billboard ranges from 250 to 1000 EUR per month. Despite the low fee, many billboards have been put illegally and there are even claims in the media<sup>3</sup> that as many as half of all billboards in the city have no license. The maximum allowed size of billboards is twelve square meters, but according to reports they are often bigger than fifteen square meters<sup>4</sup>. Bigger billboards require a construction permit from the municipality, but most of them lack such a permit. Jumbo billboards on buildings should be placed at least three and a half meters above the ground and eight meters away from any crossroad. However, this regulation is rarely followed.

The fact that billboards in Skopje are far larger and much greater in number than the regulations allow creates a host of problems for citizens, ranging from decreased visibility on the main roads and intersections to physical injuries<sup>5</sup> (and even death)<sup>6</sup> to unsuspecting passers-by.

<sup>1</sup> Daniela TRAJKOVSKA, "Centarot ke se cisti od golemi reklami," *Vecer*, September 17, 2007, <http://www.vecer.com.mk/?ItemID=36C09A4AF7A3C044B586C954C569CF37> (accessed 14.11.2011).

<sup>2</sup> Vasko MARKOVSKI, "Bilbord za 1600 denari godisno!", *Vecer*, September 9, 2006, <http://star.vecer.com.mk/tekst.asp?tid=12859> (accessed 14.11.2011).

<sup>3</sup> R.V., "Trifun rece: Dosta e", *Vecer*, June 6, 2007, <http://vecer.com.mk/?ItemID=9086070657939746943CD5DC7CE41902> (accessed 14.11.2011).

<sup>4</sup> D.T., "Voidnina - reklamiranje so usul", *Vecer*, June 8, 2007, <http://vecer.com.mk/?ItemID=B1329B3E93234D4D926CB102A222652F> (accessed 14.11.2011).

<sup>5</sup> Daniela TRAJKOVSKA, "Privatna tuzba za opasen bilbord", *Vecer*, October 22, 2007, <http://217.16.95.55/default.asp?ItemID=F20E148C484C424EB1CB15A4F72C5873> (accessed 14.11.2011).

<sup>6</sup> Daniela TRPCEVSKA, "I reklamite ubivaat", *Utrinski vesnik*, March 27, 2008, p. 2.

Evidently, the problem with billboards in Skopje is so serious that the City authorities are considering banning huge billboards around the city square and reducing their number in the streets near in the center of the city, moving most of them to the periphery. However, there is no precise deadline as to when that will happen.

In an attempt to personally identify the scale of the problem, I decided to focus on a city block in the center of Skopje, as an indicator of the overall situation. I took photographs of all billboards within that particular block, noting down their (estimated) size and location. I think it's safe to say that the administration's estimates are far too conservative when compared to the actual number. My identification showed a total of eighty one billboards in just one city block. This could be an indication that Skopje might be congested with outdoor advertising, to the point of semiotic saturation.

What may be the reason for this massive privatization of public space? Could it be that the very idea of public space – its accessibility – promotes its privatization? While it may be thought that prices of outdoor advertising are low because public space is in theory seen to be accessible to the public, to the people, but that then they make no distinction between a member of the public and a company, it would be useful to consider the different historic reading of public space in post-socialist countries. For under socialism, the street was not public space, but rather state territory. It was the site of display of the state's spectacular power as well of surveillance, where public participation was heavily orchestrated and controlled. That's why the post-socialist citizen doesn't identify such spaces as public: even though they represent in the most striking way the "disorderly" nature of the new order, they belonged to the state, and therefore with the advent of capitalism, they too could be privatized, just like the state-owned factories.

### *Reclaiming Symbolic Public Space: Artistic Interventions*

Artists in post-socialist countries are trying to reclaim this public space in an attempt to transform everyday urban experience by rewriting the body of the city with messages other than those emanating from the centers of power, capital, and privilege. The media used range from graffiti and tagging, to political messages, billboards, to installations, video, to murals, sculptures and many other forms. The approach taken by all these art projects is the one Michel de Certeau calls a "tactic". Without a place of its own, a tactic operates in isolated actions, takes advantage of opportunities and depends on them, reacting immediately. Tactics are characterized by mobility, speed, and smaller goals. De Certeau likens it to poaching:

"It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers... It creates surprises in them... In short, a tactic is an art of the weak"<sup>1</sup>.

In a series of posters displayed on citylights (outdoor advertising structures), which form the project "Bosnians Out!" ("Workers Without Frontiers", 2008),

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<sup>1</sup> Michel DE CERTEAU, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, p. 35.

developed in collaboration with Osman Pezić, Said Mujić, Ibrahim Čurić (three migrant workers from Bosnia employed on the renovation of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana) the Croatian artist Andreja Kulunčić focuses on four topics chosen by the workers themselves: working conditions, life in workers' hostels, poor nutrition and separation from their families. Kulunčić's city lights project employs a tactic of over-identification, defined by Slavoj Žižek as "ignoring this inherent obscene underside and simply taking the power discourse at its (public) word, acting as if it really means what it explicitly says (and promises)"<sup>1</sup>. The articulation of that "hidden reverse"<sup>2</sup> of every ideological message brings into light the double-sided, ambivalent aspect of the message. Furthermore, by focusing on what Michael Warner terms "counterpublics", that is, of those subaltern segments defined in opposition to a "dominant public", Kulunčić's city lights in the streets of Ljubljana explore both the stereotypical portrayal of Bosnians in Slovenia, as well as present their poor living and working conditions to Slovenians.

In "Living in Media Hype" (2002), Sašo Sedlaček (Slovenia) researches the possibilities of living in billboards and other outdoor advertisements. With their enormous sizes and access to electricity, the artists' billboards are in a way perfect for inhabitation by different social groups. This kind of housing could exist in a symbiotic-parasitic relationship between the host (billboard), providing living space and electricity, and the guest engaging in different types of activities inside the advertising space. This project calls to mind Henri Lefebvre distinction of how urban spaces often start as "representations of space", but through their use people appropriate them, socially producing a "representational space". Spatial practices, concerned with the production and reproduction of material life, rely on representations of space and representational spaces to provide them with the concepts and symbols/images necessary for them to operate.

In Macedonia, contrary to the increasing level of activism that has been noticeable recently, *artivism* – an activist action directed to creating change through the medium and resources of art – has been less prevalent. Unfortunately, the dominating mode of critically oriented art has been anti-utopianism and cynicism, the endless self-ironizing of somebody who has seen through the social rationalizations but is too smart to be deceived that she/he can change them. The final effect is one of passiveness and defeatism, as an act of consolation that one's own political limitations are objectively grounded. Such a position, amidst the increasingly emphasized non-functioning of the democratic institutions and non-existence of mechanisms for participation of publics in making decisions on issues of general concern, seems not only the easiest/safest way one can choose, but is also ethically irresponsible, in an Aristotelian sense – that only in the context of community does a person's life get any moral meaning.

In the project "Abstract Politics" (2008), the author of this paper installed his work on a couple of billboards (three x four meters in size each) on one of the busiest streets of Skopje, right in front of the government's building. They showed an abstract, non-representational image (aggregated from Google search images associated with news titles, thus infusing advertising discourse with covert political content) and a website address [www.public-space.info](http://www.public-space.info), with the idea of attracting passers-by to visit the site

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<sup>1</sup> Judith BUTLER, Ernesto LACLAU, Slavoj ŽIŽEK, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues On The Left*, Verso, London and New York, 2000, p. 220.

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj ŽIŽEK, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1989.

where they could learn more about the issue of privatization of public space. The aim was to create conditions for public deliberation and democratic discourse in the public sphere, where citizens who are informed, active, rational and knowledgeable can engage in communicative action and communicative rationality, defined by Jurgen Habermas as "non-coercively unifying, consensus building force of a discourse in which participants overcome their at first subjectively biased views in favor of a rationally motivated agreement"<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the project was funded with a grant from an international foundation which was in turn sponsored by Macedonian businesses as part of a project to promote corporate philanthropy. The project is still ongoing and has nowadays taken the form of public polls, debates and round tables on the issue, with the aim of involving an increasing number of stakeholders.

This particular work was inspired by the series of billboards, posters, and banners installed in public inner-city spaces in Eastern Europe and South America by the Austrian artist Oliver Ressler, as part of the project "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies", which reclaims the means of outdoor advertising to present alternatives to the existing social and economic system. In large and visible type, Ressler's billboards appeal to questioning existing power relations and offer alternatives that would be "less hierarchical, based on ideas of direct democracy and involve as many people as possible in decision-making processes", as the artist explains on his website. Rather than unidirectional information designed to promote consumption, these billboards are intended to serve as a basis for discussion over what kind of society is desired and should be created by the people living in it. Billboards are considered by the artist as arenas of the imagination. "Imagination is a very powerful liberating tool. If you cannot imagine something different you cannot work towards it", explains Marge Piercy in a video interview conducted for the project.

Using a plethora of propaganda devices, in his ongoing project "Territories" (2004-), Igor Toševski (Macedonia) has been declaring and establishing independent Free Territories by means of drawing physical borderlines and using propaganda devices. Within the outlined borders of the Territory, any activity or object is declared an artistic action or art object. Liberating public space from various pretexts and turning the citizen into a free artist in that particular marked public space is one of the goals of the project. But, at the same time, it is also a strong commentary on the practice of collective mark making in space to establish the boundaries of one's own territory, to distinguish one's identity from that of others, to claim a piece of land one's own, which has been so evident in the years of the dissolution of post-socialist Yugoslavia. In 2009, one of his works in the "Territories" project, a yellow cross drawn in the main square in Skopje, was hastily removed by the city authorities in less than ten hours after it was made by the artist, even though the artist acquired the necessary license to create and display his work in that public space. The cross was drawn on a particular spot in the main square where the Macedonian conservative government planned to reconstruct an Orthodox church from 1926, based on the idea that every European capital has a cathedral. The plans to reconstruct the Church in the city square are part of a much larger Government project entitled "Skopje 2014", which includes a wide range of singular interventions in the center of Skopje, such as neo-baroque public buildings, equestrian statues, public monuments, and fountains, even

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<sup>1</sup> Jurgen HABERMAS, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1990, p. 315.



a Triumphant Arch, in a PR effort to establish Macedonian identity in reference to European, Christian, and bourgeois values, by eradicating its Oriental and Islamic Past. With its monuments of Macedonian historic figures, going all the way back to Alexander the Great perching on top of a thirty meters high fountain, the main city square has become a hotspot of symbolic demarcation of identity, as well as a major point of contention between the different communities in the city. The announced reconstruction of the Orthodox church in the main square immediately provoked a demand by the Islamic religious community to simultaneously reconstruct a 15<sup>th</sup> century mosque, also in the main city square.

“I knew about the paranoia surrounding this space, but we’re talking about public space and a work of art... What is important for me at the moment is that my work has been interrupted – I want to finish it. Whoever erased the work was, in fact, the first artist in my ‘free’ space. Although they did that purposefully and didn’t participate spontaneously in my creative space, but acted on somebody’s orders, they were first nonetheless”,

the artist stated in the interview for a daily newspaper one day after his work was painted over with grey and effectively erased from the asphalt of the street<sup>1</sup>. For Tođevski, the artist is a citizen, too, who reacts to social problems in the city just like everyone else, without siding with any camp.

Another project by the author of this paper, “The Right to the City” (2008-2010), was installed as a billboard in the main city square in Skopje, Macedonia, in June 2009. Utilizing Situationist tactics and focusing on a collective utopian intervention into urban geography, this year-long participatory art project explored issues of “ownership” of public space, as well as citizens’ power to “write” urban memory as represented by the names of public space in the city of Skopje, thus reappropriating the urban landscape which belongs to all citizens. Phase one of the project started in October 2008, with a publication of an open call to the citizens of Skopje for “submitting proposals for changes to the names of streets, bridges, parks and squares in Skopje”, published on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October 2008 as an ad in the largest daily newspaper in Macedonia, *Dnevnik*. The project was not only a commentary on the familiar practice of post-socialist regimes to rewrite material history and the cultural memory of the cities by employing various methods ranging from

“subtle (surrounding of communist landmarks with tall buildings) through the obvious (renaming of streets, squares, metro stations; giving old communist buildings new names and functions) to the irreversible and, thus, most controversial (the razing of socialist architecture and monuments)”<sup>2</sup>.

The objective was also to employ a wide participatory process so as to arrive to an urban topography that would be inclusive of all, and consist not of narratives of conquerors, heroes and wars, which only serve to divide the different communities of

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<sup>1</sup> A. DIMOSKA, J. FRANGOVSKA, “Žoltiot krst što gi vobudi crvenite”, *Nova Makedonija*, October 17, 2009, <http://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/NewsDetal.asp?vest=10179929412&id=16&setIzdanie=21814> (accessed 14.11.2011).

<sup>2</sup> Agata LISIAK, “Disposable and Usable Pasts in Central European Cities”, *Culture Unbound*, vol. 1, 2009, p. 431.

the multicultural city of Skopje (as highlighted in the fact that predominantly ethnic Macedonian municipalities would choose Macedonian historic dates and figures, while predominantly ethnic Albanian municipalities would choose the names of Albanian historic dates and figures, often conflicting in their readings of history). The open call stated:

“The city of Skopje is not defined by its buildings or other facilities. This city is defined by its inhabitants, with their family ties, labor relations, with their knowledge and actions. It is not made up of the past, but of the present which is continuously being created by the people living in it. Public spaces in the city, such as squares, parks, streets and bridges, which belong to all citizens, should reflect that fact. They should carry the names of people living and working in this city today, celebrate each one of us and not just historic figures. They should mark important dates in our lives, and not the past. Therefore, fellow citizens, we call upon you to suggest new names for the public spaces in our city. Let’s name them after:

- current inhabitants of Skopje who are good parents, partners, friends, neighbors, collaborators;
- dates marking important events in our everyday lives (birthdays, weddings, etc.);
- our favorite things, such as colors, sounds, activities, etc.

Please submit your proposals along with a brief explanation (no more than half a page) online at [www.public-space.info](http://www.public-space.info) or mail them to CC Tocka, 6 Antonio Grubisic, 1000 Skopje. All proposals will be forwarded to the Skopje City Council.

Let’s make this city truly ours.” (*Open Call to the Citizens of Skopje*)

In the second stage, realized as part of the public art exhibition “The Beautiful City Will Rise Up Again”, curated by Maja Čankulovska-Mihajlovska, all proposals by the citizens of Skopje collected in the previous nine months (more than seventy) were included in a new map of Skopje, exhibited as a billboard on the central square in Skopje for a period of one week, along with a one-day performance by the artist, in which I entered into dialogue with passers-by about their opinion of the initiative and solicited proposals for new names. A survey of passers-by was conducted so as to explore their opinion on public spaces in Skopje and solicit new proposals. Furthermore, citizens were encouraged to write down street names directly on the map. All collected proposals, with documentation of the process, were eventually officially submitted to the Skopje City Council, as the body which has the authority to change the names of the streets.

This particular project was also inspired by the practice, developed in the 1970s, of former Yugoslav artist Braco Dimitrijević (born in Sarajevo, now living in Paris). Questioning cultural and material values, conventions and authorities, Dimitrijević celebrated the importance of the ordinary and the overlooked in his tactical use of instruments of historic memory/glorification: monuments (“David Harper”, London, 1972 and “Obelisk Beyond History” – a thirty three-foot Carrara-marble monument celebrating March 11, a date randomly chosen by a passer-by), plaques (with inscriptions such as “John Foster lived here 1961-1968”; “This could be a place of historic importance”), busts, street signs, list of randomly chosen names, etc. honoring unknown persons and events. “What I wanted to do was to create a reversal in meaning... Since urban space is so saturated with messages of culture

and dominant ideologies, what I set out to do was to create another space”, wrote Dimitrijević<sup>1</sup>. Understanding that public space is a semantic structure which produces, accommodates and reflects ideological constructs, Dimitrijević’s aim was for urban dwellers to establish a new relationship with their environment, and through that achieve nothing less than a different way of thinking and acting:

“Inasmuch as man encounters new content within old forms of presentation, and inasmuch as the possibility exists that he comprehends it, it may be presumed that in the future he will begin to doubt in the exclusiveness of one-way information. This may also result in a new system of associations outside the realm of established, canonized form”<sup>2</sup>.

According to Dimitrijević, an artist is primarily someone who acts in public space. With a strong understanding of the public context, his inscribing of alternative semiotic content into the city by means of interventions in public space established a new type of relation between urban topography and public art.

### *Conclusion*

As one of the essential instruments of promoting (or even better, enforcing) consumption on a previously unseen scale, billboards (and outdoor advertising in general) have significantly altered both the notion and the experience of public space. Their all-pervasive presence in the city ensures that “not a single moment of distracted strolling in the city could be spent in the absence of the commodity image”<sup>3</sup>. Buying their way into public spaces, commercial interests are threatening to reduce the production of meaning in the public arena to a one-way information flow, transforming citizens into passive recipients. The marketing overload caused by this “barrage of commercial sound effects”<sup>4</sup> significantly diminishes any meaningful opportunities for freedom of speech, with detrimental effects on democracy, for as Peter Sloterdijk underlines, “where there is no place for a countervailing power, there fear, constraint and slavish observation rule”<sup>5</sup>.

The new economic practices of reappropriating and restructuring public space, coupled with the absence of a truly public sphere defined by critical dialogue, increase the necessity and the urgency for alternative discourses to the official one dominated by advertising. And this is where public art, of the activist or politically engaged type, can offer powerful resistance to the power structures, both through its critique of commercial abuse of public spaces as well as through refashioning the urban landscape beyond the old spatial hierarchies and segregation. As Vito Acconci points out:

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<sup>1</sup> Braco DIMITRIJEVIC, “Interview with Jean-Hubert Martin (2005)”, *Slought Foundation*, 2007, <http://slought.org/content/11365/> (accessed 15.05.2008).

<sup>2</sup> Gallery of Contemporary Art, *Braco Dimitrijević*, Zagreb, Gallery of Contemporary Art, no. 191, February 8-25, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin H.D. BUCHLOCH, “From Detail to Fragment: Décollage Affichiste”, *October*, vol. 56, Spring 1991, p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> Naomi KLEIN, *No Logo*, Flamingo, London, 2000, p. 196.

<sup>5</sup> Peter SLOTERDIJK, “Atmospheric Politics”, in Bruno LATOUR, Peter WEIBEL (eds), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2005, p. 951.

“The built environment is built because it’s been allowed to be built. It’s been allowed to be built because it stands for and reflects an institution or a dominant culture. The budget for architecture is a hundred times the budget for public art because a building provides jobs and products and services that augment the finances of the city... Instead of bemoaning this, public art can use this marginal position to its advantage: public art can present itself as the voice of marginal cultures, as the minority report, as the opposition party. Public art exists to thicken the plot”<sup>1</sup>.

In this, critical public art thus becomes a parrhesiastic practice, the form of fearless speaking in public that Michel Foucault wrote about, the telling of truth in front of others regardless of the consequences, or in the final instance, freedom of speech. It becomes civic art, the type of art that promotes and creates civic values, invites and fosters citizen participation in public affairs, all of which are essential to the functioning of democracy as a discursive space. And in doing so, it comes close to realizing the ideal of public space – an arena where citizens meet to confront opposing values and expectations in public deliberation and discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> Vito ACCONCI, “Public Space in a Private Time”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 16, Summer 1990, p. 918.