

SUBALTERN KNOWLEDGE IN CULTURAL PRACTICES:
FOSTERING FAIRNESS, COOPERATION AND CARE

Erasmus + Strategic project: SHAKIN' – Sharing Subaltern Knowledge
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THE WAY A CITY REMEMBERS

The importance of site-specific projects for the process of art education

JELENA TODOROVIC AND SVETLANA VOLIC

How can site-specific research be incorporated into the teaching process? How much can the students learn from this intertwining of artistic and scholarly approaches? In which ways does learning about the memory of the particular place, of *genius loci* help in the development of their artistic practices? This paper will try to answer all these questions based on the example of a series of site-specific workshops held at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of the Arts both at MA and BA level (2014-2019). The subject of them all was the urban space and the process of remembrance and forgetting (both willing and unwilling) that is ingrained into the fabric of the city. The city as a particular form of palimpsest, was presented in these workshops, respectively by artists, scholars, archaeologists, etc. Thus, this polyphony of memories and meanings became a departure point for further artistic investigations that were so eloquently manifested through a series of exhibitions.

There is no empty space. Every space reflects our intimate and collective desires, interests, and needs. At the same time it is a particular mirror reflecting the society and the political distribution of power within it. The participant of the site-specific workshop is first of all a researcher who moves through multiple spatial layers, as well as non-linearly through time. They move through the past, present, and future of a certain space, and are placed in a situation to think, feel, create, and draw certain conclusions. Space is presented here as a depository of different histories, memories and experiences, and most importantly, as an equal partner in the creative process.

Through such polyphonic research of the space, it is possible to define its physical framework, to better understand its appearance, architecture, and purpose... It is also possible to study its history (respectively its official and oral history that lives through the traditions and memories of residents and witnesses), to research the material and immaterial cultural heritage of that space, to place it in a certain social-political context, to detect problems, to think about the protection of objects or their future use, etc. For these purposes, one could use different historical sources, whether primary or secondary sources (archival, scholarly, or literary material), or direct recordings of interviews with residents of local and city authorities. This form of research could be obtained through collaboration with institutes for the protection of monuments, through discussions with museum curators, local activists, and non-governmental organizations, sociologists, archaeologists, anthropologists, architects, urban planners, cultural workers, etc.

This method of artistic research changes our experience and everyday relationship with space, which ceases to be banal and monotonous. It enables the participation, communication, and creative interpretation of the specific loci, which become places for new cultural and social exchanges.

Reading, Visualising and Performing the City

One of the fitting educational formats for the site-specific workshops is the *Summer School of the University of Arts in Belgrade*, which is organised each year in a different city. Authors of this paper collaborated on several occasions as supervisors of international site-specific workshops held during the University Summer Schools: *The Mount for Contemplation - discovering the hidden past of the City* (2016, Belgrade - Serbia, mentors: Jelena Todorović and Svetlana Volic); *New past - genius loci Vučje* (2018, Leskovac - Serbia, mentor: Svetlana Volic); *Desire, Square - reading, visualizing and performing the town* (2019, Kotor - Montenegro, mentor: Svetlana Volic).

Each of these workshops revolved around several stages:

1. Introductory lectures

Each workshop began with introductory lectures by the supervisors and guest lecturers. Those lectures introduced the students to the history, architecture, and cultural heritage of the chosen cities, as well as to the processes of site-specific research and methods. Selected examples of site-specific projects from contemporary artistic practice were also presented.

2. Individual and group field research

The most important phase of any site-specific workshop is the research part of the process. In order to get to know and empathize with the complex city history and its cultural heritage, many guided tours as well as meetings with different representatives of local communities were planned and organized. Equally important in this phase of the workshop were psychogeography research walks. Following the flow of their physical and mental movements, students entered into a specific dialogue with the space. Through the field research, they connected the discovered premises, drew branching conclusions, and created their own narratives. The goal of those “city wanderings”, of these outer and inner ambulations, was to listen to the space, to carefully observe it, to touch it and feel it. The aim was to experience not only what is visible, but also to comprehend the invisible – to contemplate and imagine the city. During these exploratory walks, students kept detailed diaries that intertwined the text, drawings, photographs, audio and video recordings; they also collected material samples, found objects, printed frotages, etc. In this process, students communicated with local residents through a series of interviews and interactive actions. Numerous performances and ambient installations were also realized in public spaces. Through their artistic research each student established his intimate connection with the city. Some were fascinated by the natural environment and materials, others by the rich layers of cultural heritage in the city’s history (city architecture, monuments, artifacts, records, symbols, preserved documents, objects, photographs), while others critically reflected on its present state, the effects of economical/political transition,

globalization or the influence of the profit interests on the appearance and life of the city.

3. Creative reactions and production of artworks

Through daily consultations with their supervisor, students were guided individually toward the formulation and realization of the final artworks. Each site-specific workshop is a kind of experiment, with an uncertain outcome. It is important to tolerate free play and uncertainty within the process as a prerequisite for the realization of new creative potentials of students. Students were encouraged to try new approaches, methods, media, and techniques, which they may not have had the opportunity to implement in regular classes at their faculties. The emphasis was on the process itself, not on the end result; which gave the students freedom to experiment. This experience proved to be significant for their further work at the university and the development of their independent practice after graduation.

4. Public Presentation

Results of the workshops were presented in exhibitions at the Rectorate of the University of Arts in Belgrade, in the *Cultural Center* in Leskovac and in the *Solidarity Gallery* in Kotor. Exhibitions from Kotor and Leskovac were also presented in the *Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade*. The special quality of each exhibition was that artworks were performed in various media: paintings, drawings, photographs, prints, collages, assemblies, installations, objects, video works, animations, performances, or as video/ photo documentation of performances and ambient installations previously performed in specific public spaces. Exhibited artworks produced live interactions, and engendered new understandings and experiences respectively for the participants and their audience.

Exploring Visible and Invisible Cities

Besides the Summer school UAB projects, over the period of several years, four distinctive workshops also took place at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade. Each of them focused on a different concept vital for the understanding of the city as a phenomenon: *The Way a City Remembers* (2014), *Appearance and Disappearance of the City* (2015), *the City and the Confine* (2016), and *the City as Microcosm* (2017). All of them were supervised by authors of this paper and they, in greater part grew out of our experiences gathered from the international Summer School UAB workshops.

Although the general focus slightly shifted from one project to another, two topics remained central for them all – the concept of *memory* and the concept of *metamorphoses*. Like an invisible thread they weaved through all the lectures, they trailed behind us on our walks and constantly emerged in artworks, both past and present. Without them both, it would have been impossible to truly comprehend the complex fabric that is the urban space, and to grasp the *genius loci* of any metropolis. Moreover, they both implied particular forms of movements, of invisible inner journeys, that one has to embark upon. They invoked unique voyages, those undertaken backward, through time, through history and memory in order to unravel the real image of the past. Others seemed more irregular, meandering, oblique trajectories that marked the paths of urban transformations.

Thus, the first of the projects was devoted to the concept of the memory of the city; that perpetual process of writing and rewriting of both physical and symbolic space that occurs throughout history. Belgrade was particularly well suited for this type of site-specific exploration: a unique locus that has been endlessly built and rebuilt, besieged and liberated, erased and erected. It was both the ultimate city on the confine, and the ultimate liminal place, a city of intersections, of translations and transactions, of endless memories and oblivions.

Recognizing the importance of the interdisciplinary approach in art education, of intertwining artistic and scholarly approaches in teaching, from 2014 at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade we introduced the practice of site-specific art projects into the regular MA program. Thus,

these projects were aimed at entire generations of graduate students and were organized as a part of the art history/theory course. This proved to be a considerable endeavour as the groups of students often numbered more than 50 participants, but also opened a wealth of possibilities for experimentation and a combination of different media, since they came from all four art departments: Painting, Sculpture, Graphic Arts and the New Media. For the purpose of the site-specific research, they were often divided into groups, each responsible for a particular street or quarter of Belgrade. Occasionally, in order to achieve a more profound understanding of the chosen loci, students coming from different places outside Belgrade were assigned spaces of their hometown as their research topic. Thus, some of the most intriguing artworks were created to present not the genius loci of Belgrade, but the ever-shifting vistas of Požega, Kraljevo, Samoš, Pančevo or Iževsk and Moscow (Russia)...

In each of these four projects not only artists, but also experts from different disciplines of the humanities took part. The first phase of each project – *exploration* was created as a combination of lectures and in situ explorations of the city through diverse thematic walks. The second phase – *metamorphosis* – was devoted to the process of creation of artworks under the interdisciplinary supervision of both Prof. Volic and Jelena Todorović. The lectures given in the first phase of the projects encompassed a vast range of urban studies. From the philosophical point of view (Prof. Misko Suvakovic), archaeological (Milena Vasiljevic and dr Vesna Mikić), to historical (Prof. Djordje Kostić), site-specific explorations (Prof. Svetlana Volic) and art historical (Prof. Jelena Todorović). Of particular importance were the contributions of two notable artists, respective professors of the FFA: Prof. Čedomir Vasić and Prof. Mileta Prodanović. Prof. Vasic outlined the concept of diss/appearance of the very fabric of the city, a topic also central to his own oeuvre, while Prof. Prodanovic, an acclaimed painter and writer, centered his lectures around the metamorphic quality of the city, that specific fabric which exists through perpetual transformation and mutations. Often theoretical and historical presentations took part in the space of the city itself, with lectures devoted to the *genius loci* of particular neighbourhoods like *Dorcol* or *Vidin Kapija* (situated around the Rectorate of the University of the Arts, the site rich in historical artifacts from Roman to Baroque times).

After the thorough scholarly and artistic explorations, students had to choose those particular places where the process of remembering and metamorphoses, of the writing and rewriting of history, was at its most poignant, and make them the focal points of their artworks. Construed as interdisciplinary site-specific explorations, these projects were seen as possibilities for research and experimentation. Thus the students were endlessly encouraged to try new media and new languages to express their concepts, to depart from their usual practices, and primarily to use the urban space as both their departure point and the most important medium in their works.

The artworks created (whether by groups of students or sometimes individual participants) were presented annually, at the exhibitions in the Gallery of Faculty of Fine Arts. These shows, with each passing project, testify to the richness of students' artistic expressions but also to some re-occurring themes in their works: the city as a palimpsest, the instability of the city as the instability of memory spaces, the memory of the city as an artifact – the city as the grand Wunderkammer, the fragility of the very fabric of the city and the fragility of the fabric of memory...

Through examples of our joint endeavours, we wanted to present the importance of site-specific workshops for all levels of art education and to show how easily site-specific research, as well as other forms of project teaching in the field of visual arts, could be easily incorporated into the curriculums of art colleges/academia. Such workshops are of pivotal importance as they allow students to get familiar with the processes of working with *genius loci* of a particular place and enable them to comprehend the potential that such encounters have for the development of their own artistic expressions. Interdisciplinary exploration of space plays a decisive role in students' progress, as it encourages the awakening of their inner spaces – intimate needs, memories, desires and reactions. It equally enhances students' engagement with the subject of their research, furthers their interaction with society and increases the development of their critical and ethical thinking.

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