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THE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF ART: ACTIVISM, ADVOCACY AND BEYOND

Critical Artistic Interventions in the Urban Context of Four Cities in Germany and Israel

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A result of the collaborative study “*Critical Art(ist)s and Urban Development*” by Leuphana University of Lüneburg and Hebrew University of Jerusalem (2016 -2021)

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Objectives of Our Study

- Forms of critical artistic interventions in four cities
- Inter-urban fieldwork in Hamburg and Hanover, Germany, and Jerusalem and Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Israel



Underlying Rationale of Our Study

- Critique of arts and culture as tools for urban revitalization
- Interventions vary from compensatory improvement to protest-driven irritation
- Urban artistic interventions bring recurring concepts of 'art in public space' to the forefront
- Result: a comprehensive typology of urban artistic interventions



Categorization of Critical Artistic Interventions

Our categorization of interventions has two different points of departure:

- Urban artistic interventions intervene in urban spaces to question, refunction and contest prevailing norms and ideologies (Pinder).
- Critical urban artistic interventions are a step out of the protected exhibition space to change urban structures (Wege).



Defining Critical Urban Artistic Interventions: Motives and Outcomes

Motives of Critical Urban Artistic Interventions:

- Critical representation of reality
- Optimistic suggestion of alternative realities
- Provocation of established politics
- Distance to maintain the autonomy of the arts

Outcomes of Critical Urban Artistic Interventions:

- Undermining the marketing image of the city
- Breaching, changing, creating urban structures
- Protesting/fighting vs. preserving/withstanding change
- Intellectual discourse vs. real changes



Methodology

- 82 semi-structures interviews with artists and artistic core personnel
- Analysis by systematic content analysis of transcribed interviews (Atlas.ti)



Results:

A Typology of Five Urban Artistic Interventions

1. *Artistic intervention as aesthetization*
2. *Artistic intervention as social communication*
3. *Artistic intervention as breaching experience*
4. *Artistic intervention as protest*
5. *Artistic intervention as a utopian experiment*

Urban artistic intervention	Techniques, crafts and tools	Primary goals	Sociability	Relationship to urban space
Aesthetization	Sculpture, paintings, photography and other plastic art forms	Beautification, motives of l'art pour l'art	Low sociability, experienced individually by each viewer	Representational space: the city as exhibition space, background and inspiration
Social communication	Socially-minded art work and artistic workshops (for example, social sculptures, urban gardening, cooking projects)	Increasing social cohesion and community interaction	High sociability, uniting social groups and communities, with a high degree of place attachment	Social space: with emphasis on place-based attachment, community ideals, and greater social cohesion
Breaching experience	Conceptual art, performance art, street art, guerilla art	Enlightening and stimulating city-zens' critical reflection on an urban issue or crisis, often in an irritating manner	Medium sociability, interventions in public spaces, no active participation of the public	Debate space: the city as agora for public arguments, investigations and revelations
Protest	Direct political action as art activity (for example, squatting, sit-ins, demonstrations)	Challenging and protesting established political and economic power structures	High sociability, involvement of artists and activists from different backgrounds	Protest space: the city as a stage and space for demonstrations and direct action
Utopian experimentation	Urban placemaking, public events and festivals	Introducing alternative socio-political visions for the city and urban development	High sociability, thought and experimentation, required for utopian visions to take shape.	Experimental space: the city as an arena for exploring new possibilities

1. Artistic intervention as aesthetization

- The **first** type of artistic urban interventions relies on its aesthetic value, in the sense of the beautification or decoration (in a non-derogatory sense) of and in public spaces of a city.

“I am very much aware of the power aesthetics have – a great power. And that's why one should use it carefully, and always know it has content. At the end of the day, the aspiration for pure art has a social and ideological content” (LA, Tel Aviv).



2. Artistic intervention as social communication

- The **second** type understands its purpose as social communication with the local community, using the adhesive power of the arts, and supporting social fringe groups and bridging inequalities.

“The state theatre went out to this poor neighborhood, we talk about a society here which is influenced by migration so we will try to ask communities what are your interests, what are your resources, what are your topics and ... that is the big difference to what we normally do in the state theatre.” (NR, Hamburg)



3. Artistic intervention as breaching experience

- The **third** type follows the sociological term “breaching experiment” to question taken-for-granted regulations and everyday norms, preparing the way for revisions.

“I believe that the decisive potential that artists can perceive better than many other professions is the critical questioning of the city ... I feel art has to be disturbing, art has to be something you stumble upon, art has to make your straight way a bit bumpy and then you start thinking.” (TS, Hanover)

Turning the pews of the Market Church by 51 degrees away from the altar.



4. Artistic intervention as protest

- The **fourth** type blurs the borders among political and artistic practice. Direct political acts become artwork, art happenings become political protest.

“You look dangerous and suspicious and walk around [St. Pauli] town. Inevitably, the police caught someone and pulled a white toilet brush... And this was shot by a television team and came into the main news. Then, the toilet brush became the symbol of the movement and everybody started to buy a toilet brush. And then the flash mobs were suddenly called brush mobs and there were many meetings.” (CS, Hamburg)

Police frisking an artist-activist (artist) and discovering a toilet brush as an alleged weapon.



5. Artistic intervention as a utopian experiment

- The **fifth** type emphasizes that new visions for urban futures are possible. There are many different but concrete goals like workshops for urban gardening, campaigns to connect diverse people, try out social experiments and create spaces of new possibilities, innovative placemaking, and communicate environmental consciousness by artists.



“Art as today is one of the most direct ways to inspire change; so I use art when it is needed ... It is not only art, we are creating a new urbanism. Creativity and art are part of it ... We are trying to develop a complete model of a new community.”
(MI, Jerusalem)

Conclusion

Artistic urban interventions shape urbanity:

- Aesthetization = city as background
- Social communication = city as social stage
- Breaching experience = uncovering the city
- Protest = city as agora for dissent
- Utopian experiment = the city as a space of possibilities



Urban artistic interventions try to “question, refunction and contest prevailing norms and ideologies, and ... often create new meanings, experiences, understandings, relationships and situations.” (Pinder 2008: 730)

Thank you for your attention!

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