

senior street art a participatory and intergenerational project on visually reclaiming street and city

by Stephanie Hanna

In 2005, I initiated the project “senior street art“ in Berlin that involved working with older people to explore graffiti and street art as forms of autonomous visual participation in contemporary urban space. So far, I co-operated with two organizations. The first is a communal art space, the Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, which in 2003, 2005, and 2007 hosted an exhibition series about street art, urban communication, and aesthetics called “backjumps - the live issue”¹. In the context of “backjumps”, my project was part of a programming of public excursions, discussions and workshops and addressed a different group of people than normally interested in graffiti and street art. The second organization I worked with was an activity centre for senior citizens. In that context, I offered a unique art workshop, the aim of which was also to mediate through the heightening of artistic sensitivity and to encourage reflection on perceptions relating to graffiti, art, and the city.

Preliminary Considerations

My original interest was to work with individual forms of expression in public space. I wondered whose expressions in public space would mostly likely gain my attention, and soon connected these thoughts with my curiosity about the life experience of older people.

I often meet older people who want to share something with me: sometimes a personal story while on the street, in a supermarket, or at a bus stop, but more often, they tell me not to cross a red light, or not to cycle on the pedestrian walk. Reflecting on this led me to contemplate what older people might want to express publicly and in what form. Why aren't they involved in expressing themselves in public, urban space? Have they become less rebellious with age? Are they shy to appear publicly? For what other reasons might they not claim this space?

To do experimental research on this, I created an uncommon exchange. I found inspiration in work by the Austrian artist group WochenKlausur, particularly in their project *Öffentliche Streitkultur* (“public discourse”?), in which they installed a cube in public space that was used as an environment for initiating and mediating talks between two groups with opposing opinions². I was also inspired by an article by political and cultural theorist Oliver Marchart, within which he defined public space and the notion of “publicness”³. His thesis is that “democratic publicness” can only be created through antagonistic conflict in a meeting of different opinions.

No one asked me to create this project; I initiated it on my own. I got started by responding to a call for projects called “How do you creatively shape your society,” which was part of a project called “evolutionary cells” organized by the artist group finger and the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst in Berlin⁴. Although I did not win one of the prizes to fund my project, I did get a temporary job as exhibition guide for the project, which provided me with access to information about over 600 grassroots projects concerning social, cultural, artistic, and alternative living. Developing knowledge in this area eventually gave me the tools I needed for “senior street art”.

1 Curated by Adrian Nabi and Stéphane Bauer

2 WochenKlausur, *Öffentliche Streitkultur*, Nürnberg (D), 2000. Institut für moderne Kunst. http://www.wochenklausur.at/projekte/13p_kurz_dt.htm

3 See Oliver Marchart, 'Politics and Artistic Practice: On the Aesthetics of the Public Sphere', in *Frakcija. Performing Arts Magazine*, Nr. 33/34, 2004/05 (Winter), S.14-19

4 See <http://www.ngbk.de> and <http://www.evolutionaere-zellen.org>

Those initial aims were often challenged by differences in values, opinions, and politics with my cooperation partners. For instance, while the tagged and sprayed exterior of the senior citizens centre is precisely what drew my attention to it in the first place, the head of the centre, as well as many of the people who used it, wanted the building to look more inviting. However, I liked the ragged and somewhat aggressive appearance of the building as a visualization of the generation gap that exists in society. But the wish of the head and some of the frequent users also felt like some kind of commission.

While seeking permission to work on the façade of the centre officially and seeking funding, I started to encounter even more different interests concerning this project. In the course of so many discussions, I started to wonder for whom I was actually working.

This became clearer while trying to secure permission to alter the appearance of the building from the architect responsible for its design.⁵ Specialists such as architects and urban designers typically decide how the public space is organized and looks. They plan while looking at small scale models, and frequently without considering the positions that will be occupied by actual inhabitants. Most issues are decided based on economic reasons. It's a curious reality that the people who are most affected by the appearance of a building or area are, for the most part, least responsible for how it will look.

Although the architect Alvaro Siza had formerly been interested in participatory methods, he was not willing to give permission for any alterations at this point. In effect, we had to work without permission and make interventions that were more subtle and did not change the general appearance of the building. I was happy with that decision.

Working Methods

I worked with the participants on a very personal level. In the first year, the project involved four women between the ages of 61 and 70. A few more people attended a tour of the "backjumps" exhibition hosted by the curator. The small number of participants made it possible for the project to flow according to individual needs. In 2006, nine people between 58 and 82 years of age were involved in a week-long program of workshops and other diverse activities at the activity centre, and 13 artists between ages 20 and 34 worked with them.

Being aware that views on this matter differ from person to person, I was careful to avoid turning our work in public space into a sensationalized spectacle of "grandma doing graffiti". While we worked people often spontaneously stopped to watch. As a group, we liked the attention we received, and regarded it as a reasonable part of the project. However, media attention was a completely different matter. One morning, at 7:30 a.m., a TV reporter called me to ask if a crew could come by and take some footage. He was unable to say why or in what context the material would be aired. His call made me feel like a dealer exhibiting exotic species. I regarded myself as an artistic co-creator working with the project participants in a shared process, and I knew that none of us wanted a TV crew to misconstrue what we were doing by reporting on our workshop or on graffiti in general⁶ for the sake of entertainment. We did not feel like serving this system, so instead we decided to produce our own video by assembling a documentary team from a nearby independent film school and conducting amateur interviews with passers by about graffiti. In this way, we got to control how we were recorded, and most importantly, we had a lot of fun adding a new dimension to the workshop.

5 The senior centre was constructed following the IBA architecture competition in 1988. While an unusual scenario, according to this competition the award-winning architect, in this case Alvaro Siza, is to be consulted about changes to the building.

6 As requested by another team working for the station RTL.

I find socio-cultural and art mediation work to be an excellent practical basis for artistic research into society because such projects communicate in accessible ways and are inspiring. However, this approach raises an important moral question: am I exploiting the participants for my own artistic benefits? It was only through working with the participants that I could evaluate the situation. Throughout the process, I sought balance between giving and receiving. Giving included the workshop, new awareness and sensitivity, new ideas, space for experimentation, and attention. Getting included encouraging participants to push their ideas a little further in directions I found interesting, and documenting the process.

When working with a group of people on an art project such as this one, the unusual and at times confrontational situations that occur can be daunting for everyone involved. To be sure I could handle the situations I created and took various precautions. For example, I made contact with some graffiti writers who frequently left their mark on the senior citizen activity centre. The older people and I had intended to work directly on the walls as well. I didn't want to unnecessarily provoke the graffiti writers' aggression, so we considered working with them. In the end, I decided not to because I had a feeling they were mainly interested in a whole wall and working material for free, and not actually interested in the process of exchanging with older people. Such processes of negotiation and conflict brought a greater understanding of our positions in everyday life, and ultimately the socio-political context.

Potential for Change Through Art

Artistic processes can lead us to question preconceptions and open up new personal ways of understanding. In this sense participatory art practice might be a form of direct action to produce small changes in society, amongst those involved. Participants reconsider their assumptions through a process of working together and concrete experience and emotional engagement, allowing for new social awareness and empathy to emerge in confrontation with the others in the group and beyond it as they are encountered in the course of the project.

Yet, rather than to allow for open questioning, and for the potential of new things to emerge through the coming together of the group in the project, political and social aims in socially engaged art projects are often defined as specific goals from the outset. How can we artistically research society when we already have to know beforehand what will be the effects, where we will come out at the end of the way? And how can we challenge the limits of the potential for social and political change dictated by such a narrow framework?

Process-oriented art practices

Since practical work produces new consciousness through experience, I was curious to learn how participants might have been affected by their involvement with "senior street art". Two months after the end of the project, I interviewed the participants about their experiences over the course of the previous two years. I also interviewed participating artists about their experiences. The responses from both groups addressed the project in very individual and unique ways.

I am in the process of developing a form of presentation about the experiences gained through this project. In light of the responses and various other forms of documentation I've collected, I am seeking to create something with a artistic and political position that will further define the value of the project. At the point, I am still assessing what all of it means. In some cases, I was surprised to discover certain things. For example, through the interviews, I learned that my personal attitude, at certain moments, directed experiences more than I realize. But really, I want to help generate work that was as emancipated as possible by encouraging participants to follow individual desires and abilities, and by only gently expanding perceptions and possibilities. I discovered that the themes they wanted to explore involved issues such as "water", "oil", and "Africa" instead of personal experiences and

desires. I felt that those themes were not so much the shared desire of the group, as based on the suggestions of one participant. To me, her suggestion was not so much a reflection of a strong personal desire, but an impulse to reproduce what already existed in political graffiti. It was also an intention to focus on good and important public issues – oil and water – while not acknowledging their personal feelings and lives. In addition, I felt a lot of preconceptions amongst the participants with regards to their abilities.

To get them to relax and express their feelings, I decided to use artistic production techniques that help to let go of mental control, such as sound meditation, drawing with eyes closed, pencils in both hands etc. Using this as thematic material, we produced stencils that proved to be a good means for experimenting with spray cans, image placement, and colour. I also introduced an exercise that involved starting on a poster and then rotating work stations after 10 minutes, then after 5 minutes, and faster and faster until each person has changed places with the person sitting next to them and, in effect, all contributing to each person's original image and making all images a collaborative effort. Through a variety of such exercises, it was great to observe how the group grew together, in spite of their diverse individual and special characters. When placing the works outside, the group really worked together and the project was truly collaborative.

Participants' Comments

If my attitude has changed with this course, I don't know. My interest just got higher.

It's like with music, if you hear it for the first time, you're maybe..., well, I always listen three times to new music. The first time, it is often difficult, and that it was with graffiti, too. Then you start growing into it, playing around, having fun... yes, there was a lot of joy. It happens when you don't see something as work anymore, and deliver yourself to enjoy. You become very sensitive exploring colours, with art in general, everything takes a new turn.

Renate

I see the things different now, too, more intensive. I really don't mind if there is a face on the streets, not just bare walls. I enjoy, and know that not everything can be perfect. In our society, all has to be perfect.

I was collecting tree bark here in this park which had paint on it. Digging it up a hundred years later, one would be pleased to discover what was written, how it was written. Nowadays, we damn it.

Graffiti doesn't unite people, because there are different opinions on it, but it produces communication, encounters. That is what is beautiful about it. Many people arguing against it don't see that, they go shopping, come back, go shopping again, come back and suddenly there is something on the wall. Lucky if they still see it. Then, there can be communication.

Toni

The communication is a little one-sided, if I look at it in public space. If I put up something on the wall which is important to me, how do I experience a reaction?

Only if I stay around listening to what people have to say about it, if they say what they think about it at all.

I think, for me, as a single person, that isn't the thing to do. In a group, in

combination with actions addressing passers-by directly, yes, I could imagine. Anonymity isn't really my thing, I have to admit.

I don't see beauty in tags on houses. Also, they are only understandable for the scene, knowing each others tags. I don't want to deny the adolescents doing that have their reasons. But I am not a part of that scene, and will never be.

Eva

Graffiti also are a hint that it can't go on just like that: Look at us, we are also there. Well, other generations of men stand and pee on the trees. This is as legitimate, really... We made something negative out of that we are producing. No matter, which way. If you look at nature, you see cycles. If we take out something of that cycle, we are taking away information to work with. Graffiti are partly undigested. But it is information.

And if you take a look at fairytales, if you go out and share what you have, even if it is just a piece of stale bread, you are rewarded later on, getting help from somewhere.

I find it so strange to criminalize things that are really so natural.

Sigrid