



ENGAGED ART EDUCATION

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Contact: InSEA Publications. Quinta da Cruz (APECV).
Estrada de São Salvador, 3510-784 São Salvador, Viseu
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Editors

Ângela Saldanha

Maja Maksimovic

Teresa Torres de Eça

Maria Letsiou

Hester Elzerman

Language Revision

Susan Coles

Graphics

Ângela Saldanha

Cover Image

Maria Letsiou

InSEA Publications

Quinta Da Cruz, Viseu, Portugal

www.insea.org

Email: inseaservices@gmail.com

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Vanja Zarić, Milica Milošević, Jana Mišović, Natalija Gojak: Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

Liminal Belgrade and Social Practice

Abstract

This article is a result of master students engaged in the course Expressive methods in adult education at the Faculty of Philosophy, department of andragogy and the art project they conducted. Street art is often seen as a form of vandalism since it's illegal, even though it's often showing other beliefs and perspectives that are in contrast to what is seen in the mainstream media. Perceiving street art and, more specifically, graffiti as a strong medium for those whose voices can't be heard otherwise, we combined it with the concept of social practice and liminality. Socially engaged art or social practice aims to initiate and influence a certain social change, which was in this case verbalized through the use of street art. Since being an extremely important social problem among almost any category of people, including younger generations that we are a part of, we chose the subject of unemployment. Furthermore, we selected liminal places in Belgrade, the spaces that are just passed through and don't have a purpose of their own, to carry out this project, with the aim to transform them and give them learning potential, by leaving stencils that will interact with everyday passers and potentially spark a change.

Through the presented work, we can notice that liminal spaces and socially engaged art have a great potential to initiate the transformation of individuals through the processes of participation and learning, as well as social practice and reality itself. Through the implementation of the project, we have come up with a series of conclusions regarding its process, which we presented in our work.

Kroz prikazani rad možemo da uočimo da liminalni prostori i socijalno angažovana umetnost imaju veliki potencijal da pokrenu kako transformaciju individua kroz procese učestvovanja i učenja, tako i samu socijalnu praksu i realnost. Putem izvođenja projekta smo došli do još niza zaključaka koji se tiču njegovog procesa, a koje prikazujemo u radu.

Key words: art in education, liminality, liminal space, socially engaged art, social practice, street art, stencils, participation, learning

Introduction

The majority of young people who just finished their studies, or who are soon going to, end up, are being caught in the catch 22 of the labour market, where they are required to have unrealistic amount of work experience to get a job. But also need a job to get experience! Being trapped in this situation as well, we identified it with the concept of liminality. We decided to explore this concept by combining it with the liminality of our city and capturing abandoned and in-between spaces. Taking into observation that the problem of unemployment is a much wider and deeper issue. Affecting our personal lives in almost every social category. Our project was transformed into social practice. Thus, the aim of this article is to give an inside view of the entire process of designing and implementing a socially engaged art project, while exploring its connection with art in education and street art, and discovering their learning potentials. In the first part of the paper we provide theoretical considerations that served as a base for our project and helped in developing it, such as the concept of liminality and social practice. Given the emphasis on the process within the philosophy of art education, we followed the same line and devoted a great part of this paper in showing our socially engaged process. Finally, on the basis of theoretical considerations and the experienced process, we located certain effects and conclusions presented at the end of this paper.

Art in Education and Social Practice

Thinking and writing about art-based education, it is important to have in mind that two social phenomena have been merged – education and art, which carries a great complexity with itself. Education implies several types, including formal, non-formal and informal, each of which is defined by a different set of rules that determine its further course. Thus, formal education, due to its social role, promotes rigidity, defined criteria and the existence of an “accurate answer”.

Although it often takes on characteristics of formal, non-formal education provides much greater flexibility, and therefore greater openness, diversity and lower standardization of validation.

Contrary to the tendencies of market-oriented education focused exclusively on the outcomes of education, art in education aims to stir up this kind of capitalist discourse by concentrating on the process itself and the value of its learning potential, rather than on the sheer end results that are often treated as products. Alongside art in education, the concept of socially engaged art embraces artwork projects as a process that will

help create constructive social change, as opposed to producing profitable commodities (McKay, 2016).

Taking into consideration that all art is created to be communicated with other people or to be experienced by them, all art is social. But, "...to claim that all art is social does not take us very far in understanding the difference between a static work such as a painting and a social interaction that proclaims itself as art – that is socially engaged art" (Helguera, 2011: 1). That being said, one of the main characteristics of socially engaged art is "its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence" (Ibidem: 2).

It is also generally referred to as "social practice", a term in which we can notice the absence of the art-making process. The reasoning behind this is a "growing general discomfort with the connotations of the term", alongside the efforts of social practice to exclude the modern and postmodern concepts of artists as illuminated visionaries and self-conscious critical beings (Ibidem: 3). Although art may seem very free and liberating at first glance, it showed its elitist character by imposing clear rules that need to be followed in order for someone to be called an artist, and by as well being reserved for a small circle of high class people that are allegedly only ones capable of understanding art, which they are able to buy as a product. Instead, social practice nurtures and acknowledges the concept of a person or people working with and for society, without imposing high standards and criteria that need to be achieved for it to be characterized as successful and meaningful.

Furthermore, socially engaged art or social practice believes that artists and art can influence the society with their work by creating something for them or with them using a different variety of forms and materials that are not necessarily perceived as traditionally artistic.

In that way, social practice should not be perceived as a "one-man show", so the work reflects only one person's ideas and is a result of individual effort. On the contrary, its main idea is collaboration in creating space for influencing social change. Since social change is primarily a political question, the work can be centered around political matters, as well as it can be perceived as a political act (Frasz & Sidford, 2017).

The idea of making our project socially engaged came spontaneously, without our initial intention to do so. The process of coming up with our project will be explained with more details later, but it is important to emphasize that it wasn't planned to look a certain way or to cover certain topics, nor to be socially engaged. It turned out to be that way

because all people included in it shared a mutual need and desire to have their voices heard and, coming to realisation that the subject of our practice wasn't just our personal problems, to be the voice of many other people that are affected by the same issues.

"I think a lot of people that are passing by our stencils relate with them, or should I say with us, and that the problem we tried to point out with our art project is something that a lot of us have in common, so maybe it can become a common ground that will bring people together and influence the change. The more we express our dissatisfaction with various flaws within the system, the more we are creating opportunities to connect with one another and work together towards fixing those issues."

"The thing that I enjoyed the most during this whole process was learning how to create stencils with other people included in this project and actually doing them on the street. I realized the great power that this art form has in communicating with other people that are just passing by. Our art is communicating with them instead of us and taking into consideration the subject of our stencils, which is unemployment, I think that majority of people that encountered our work can relate to the problems we showcased on the street, because they are not just the result of our individual dissatisfaction, but on the contrary, they reflect a greater chronic social problem."

After choosing stencils as an art form we felt most comfortable with and that intrigued us the most, we share an opinion that street art, with its philosophy, history and principles, can absolutely be qualified as socially engaged art. Street art in general is a social practice that aims to reclaim a space as public, which in itself is a political act. Since it includes visually modifying different public areas, such as buildings, streets, stations and other, it is often illegal and thus perceived as an act of vandalism. Taking the climate of censorship under which we live in into consideration, that controls which information will reach the public and be used as distractions from core problems, street art can be helpful in revealing and drawing attention to some deeper societal issues and attitudes towards them that could not be heard otherwise since they are a means of opposing and providing resistance.

Street art is also often used in spaces that are perceived as liminal or in-between, which

is something that drew us closer to this art form and social practice, since we already gained interest in the concept of liminality. This way, we saw street art as a perfect link that connects liminal spaces and art, but also liminality as a point in life and a feeling caused by a situation that served as a main subject of our work. Stencils are seen as a way to reclaim a space by filling it with some kind of content that will draw attention to it in places that are usually just passed through and that don't have a purpose of their own and exist solely for transit purposes (Young, 2014). We can argue about whether or not stencils can create a meaning and cause a transformation in the way we are experiencing a certain space, but we think we can't deny the learning potential it has, both for the people creating them and for the people that are faced with them while passing through (liminal) public places.

"Stencils and graffiti always catch my attention whenever I'm walking through the streets. I already have my favourites, but it is a totally different experience learning how to create them. What I found especially interesting is the fact that they are relatively hard to make, but easy and quick to apply them on the street. At first I felt hesitant because I didn't see myself as an artist or someone who can be extraordinary creative, but I realized that you don't have to be remarkably talented to be able to express yourself, especially if it's something that you feel good doing and that's socially relevant. It's actually a really liberating feeling that I gained by doing stencils, which empowered me to continue expressing myself through art."

The Process

When we are referring to the process of our project, we can actually differ two stages: the starting one and the other that began with the inclusion of new people. The first one started with our enrollment in the course Expressive Methods in Adult Education at Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade during our master studies. We, the authors of this article and students in that course, decided to carry out an art intervention. In the beginning we mapped some of the topics we were interested in and which could give us inspiration for the design and implementation of the intervention. These included: rituals, poetry, the concept of liminality and liminal spaces.

After mapping these topics, we started working and researching individually our topics of interest. We searched for their theoretical backgrounds, as well as some existing art

practices covering our subject. Our individual research ended with the presentations of our work, which is when we made a decision to focus on the synergy of liminality and physical places in the form of liminal spaces.

In accordance with our decision to focus on liminal spaces, we gave ourselves next task: to think about and take pictures of places we view as liminal. We wanted to map out liminal spaces in Belgrade so we can try to experience the city we live in in a different way and to discover liminal Belgrade. Spaces we discovered differed from private to public, from populated to abandoned and they also included rented apartments in which some of us live in, burned clubs, elevators, buses, underground passages, etc.

After mapping out liminal Belgrade, we can say that we also fell into the liminal phase of our project. We were somewhere in-between, we had something, but didn't know what to do next. We didn't know which steps to take next, nor how to further research our topics. Not having answers to many of our questions demotivated and discouraged us. We were searching for solid answers and steps and wanting directions, even though we ourselves didn't believe in them.

The liminal phase was not short. For more than a month, we wandered without answers, more and more frightened up until we intuitively made the decision to include other people in the process with whom we could design and carry out the intervention. The inclusion of other people and the expansion of the group represent our exit from the liminal phase and a new process that relates to the previous one. This decision was good because it gave us new motivation to continue. We searched for people of different profiles, which could contribute to the consideration of liminal spaces and artistic interventions from different angles. There was a musician, a graphic artist, a psychologist, an ecologist, a philosopher, an architect and an andragogist. To find people, we relied on previous acquaintances and acquaintances of our friends.

We had 7 different encounters with the new people during which we worked together to think of the intervention, and after that we performed it. The first meeting was dedicated to getting to know each other, since most people did not know each other. We created a pleasant and supportive atmosphere, which was the case of every next meeting. At that time, we presented them our process: what were the topics we were researching, what were our thoughts, what we had done so far. However, as we wanted the process to be participatory, we emphasized that everything done so far was not final and unchanged. We did not want the participants to think that their role is to

implement ideas we thought of before meeting with them, but to work together. This also meant that we were ready to start from scratch if that was necessary, as well as being open to new and different ideas and possibilities.

At the first meeting, everyone was especially interested in liminality, and we agreed to prepare a more detailed presentation of this concept for the second meeting so that everyone would understand it well. While we were trying to map different practical examples of this concept, what we could label ourselves as liminal, one girl said:

"Based on what I heard, I think I can say that I was in a liminal period when I graduated from University. I did not know what to do next, I wanted a job, but they asked for experience I did not have, and which I did not have where to get. Something like a catch 22. I was no longer a student, I left that role, but I still did not have a new one."

This conclusion is of great importance for the entire process, because the whole process afterwards has been redirected to this example. That girl's experience was something each one of us could relate to. That fact is not surprising, since we live in the context of high unemployment rates, especially among younger people. As this informal group was made of young people, who either graduated from University, or were about to graduate, they were drawn to this example, as expected. With this "connection" came a shift in our focus: we went from liminal spaces to unemployment as liminal. A decision was made on a group level to address the social problem of unemployment.

After we came up with a new topic to work on, the next meeting was centered around which form of intervention we wanted to realize. The original idea was to create an interactive exhibition on the topic of unemployment as a liminal period in a person's life. However, over time street art began to catch on as a possible form of intervention. There was a discussion on interesting issues: does street art design and give meaning to spaces? Then, do those spaces cease to be liminal with art intervention? How do people perceive them? How do people perceive meanings offered by street art? Can street art have an educational character? The fruitful discussion resulted in the decision to intervene in the form of street art, using stencils. Stencils have been evaluated as an art form that is easily feasible, which anyone can quickly learn, which is "easily spread" over the city, and which leaves, along with that, a somewhat permanent trace.

We decided to organize a workshop in order for everyone to be able to learn how to make stencils. Therefore, the next two meetings were dedicated to the concretization of ideas concerning the workshop about stencil-making techniques. We were mostly dealing with "technical" matters, such as: finding the person who would lead the

workshop, finding the place where the workshop would be held, making the list of materials that were necessary, the purchase of materials, etc.

The next meeting was dedicated to determining the places where the stencils would be drawn. As we have already written in the theoretical part of the paper, the form of stencils is often used in areas that are liminal, in that way giving them meaning and an educational character. Therefore, we decided to intervene in liminal spaces. Thanks to that, we merged the original idea of dealing with liminal spaces and later decisions to draw attention to the problem of unemployment. In order to map liminal spaces in Belgrade, we organized a workshop. The first part of the workshop was inspired by the assignment we worked on at the beginning of the whole process: the participants were asked to think about which areas they perceived as liminal and where they are located. On the basis of this consideration, the mapping followed.

Specifically, each participant made their own map of liminal Belgrade, on which the previously selected liminal spaces were drawn. Then, based on all these maps, a common map of liminal Belgrade was made that was also a "list" of places we were going to transform with the intervention.

The last meeting was supposed to be the realization of the stencil-making workshop, as well as the realization of our artistic intervention. The workshop began with a brief historical overview of this art form, followed by a discussion on the similarities and differences of this technique compared to other forms of street art (graffitis, murals, etc.). After that, it was necessary to determine the content of the stencils, what messages would be drawn and/or written on them. This was a phase that required a lot of creativity, and it was interesting to watch how it unfolded. The creative process was completely collective: all ideas were suggested and discussed on a group level. For each idea, the group discussed if they supported it and if they found it good and satisfactory. However, the process suddenly "dropped down" to the level of smaller groups and to the level of participants who worked individually. The ideas for stencils about the topic of unemployment were diverse, and some of them can be seen in this paper. The making of the stencils had a relaxing flow and took place in an entertaining atmosphere. Then, when the night fell, a key part followed: the transformation of liminal spaces.

Effects

Engaging the community in the research process, the researcher and other participants

take the same positions, thus eliminating the boundaries between them. This approach to the understanding of the world makes it both artistic and educational. Analyzing the participants in the process, we could discover their dual roles: the role of the researcher, and the role of the artist. While the creative process is reflected in the selection and application of an artistic method which serves to respond to a problem that's "bothering" us, as well as an adequate shaping of responses to the topic, the educational part follows the findings on the problem, but also on the artistic method itself. As we already mentioned in the description of the process, before the creation of the stencils, an introductory workshop was organized concerning the history of using stencils as an artistic method, the possibilities of its application in different contexts, and its placement into social frameworks. In this way, not only has the knowledge about stencils been deepened, but more intense thinking about the topic of unemployment has been initiated which needed to be presented through stencils. Also, artistic expression on the streets where a large number of people passes by on a daily basis opens up the possibility of encouraging the community to think about certain problems, namely in this case, unemployment; the ultimate goal is the activation of the local population in solving the problem.

By encouraging individuals to join researchers and jointly take on the same roles, to discuss problems and to map-out key points of a large phenomenon such as unemployment, you're enabling a very subtle but powerful way of responding to unemployment, which affects almost every age category of the population. Although socially engaged art does not have enough strength in its core to solve unfortunate social situations, it still manages to draw attention to mapped problems, and with its educational components, it encourages individuals to reflect and make a change.

Joining of members of the community in the process brought new challenges, but also new ideas and additional energy for the growing collective. The participants (which were subsequently included in the research) came from different backgrounds, which introduced a much greater number of perspectives on the phenomenon of unemployment in the context of liminality.

In a diverse context such as this one, the participants' reactions on the process were different. One participant pointed out that what impressed her the most in the entire process was

the method itself: "Unemployment is a topic that we face daily and which we also analyze daily. The inability to easily overcome this high rate of unemployment, affecting both young people and adults, often leads to feelings of anxiety. However, learning about the creation of stencils as a method that finds its place among ordinary people

and that allows communication between you and the local population, creates a feeling that it is actually possible to encourage people to organize and act through various activities. The non-existence of rigid rules that very often "suffocate" us in this modern society, as well as the lack of evaluation of the artistic value of expression itself, create a sense of freedom that fosters reactions."

Even though we are surrounded by various types of social practices in the streets of our city on a daily basis, we do not devote enough attention to artists, or how and when they leave their mark on incredible heights, bridges and streets in the city center. Thus, one of the participants stated at the entrance to the student dormitory that her greatest impression was the act of expression "Growing up in Belgrade, throughout my life I have faced a very intense culture that supports street art. Through graffiti and stencils we can see how one city lives. However, what you cannot see is when artists write their thoughts and attitudes. To leave a trace in the public space is an illegal action, which requires that you have to be very careful when choosing time and location. While leaving my stencil "Are you afraid of the labor market?" .

I also had the feeling that I was doing something that society perceives as forbidden, but there was also a sense of satisfaction because with my work I can encourage people to understand the size of fears that are provoked by the labour market, from which we often come out as losers, that is, the unemployed. I was very fond of participating in active action, and not just theoretically considering the problem." Multistage discussions in the context of the priority of content over the form or vice versa, we can conclude that they do not have an universal answer. Based on the

prominent statements of the participants who would give their primacy to the form, there were also those who stated that they had deepened their thoughts on the stated topic:

"I am an architect by profession. I am engaged in public spaces and the city's adaptability to its citizens. Although there's present feeling of anxiety related to getting a job in my profession, I did not think about how I could show my views related to this topic through artistic expression until I joined this process. The creation of the stencil itself was not a problem, but it was necessary to make additional efforts to design the appropriate symbol to present the unemployment, which required additional exploration of the phenomenon. It was very interesting to learn about the method of stencils, but also about its link with architecture, and with addressing great social problems."

The people passing by, who witnessed the painting of our stencils on the streets of Belgrade had different reactions. For the needs of the realization of the stencils, we

than us, which are affected with the unemployment problem as well. In this way we would potentially use a different methodology for addressing this problem, which would result in different outcomes due to the possibility of intergenerational learning.

Nonetheless, we look on this whole process and our project as exceptionally important.

On the one hand, it's great to do something that does not have a pre-defined outcome, because it opened up space for learning, for new topics, enabled openness for errors and stagnation, from which we had a lot to learn. As well as learning how to work with people of different profiles and characters. Also, on the other hand, although we did not have predefined outcomes, after completing the project, we can still conclude that we have achieved many outcomes. Openness for people's thoughts and their right participation enabled this project to result in diverse and socially significant results, as well as results that are personally relevant to individual participants. We think that this should encourage all practitioners of adult education to be involved in these types of projects and to encourage it in their own practice.

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