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Place and Interventionist Art

An analysis of interventionist public art based on interventions in Freedom Square in Tallinn, Estonia

In the paradigm of modernist avant-garde art after WWII, public art became secondary in status. It was considered to be synonymous with compromise, dilution and dependency. Popular public spaces were left for corporate or communal sculptures, while the emerging land art moved into the periphery – onto the ranches of eccentric patrons and unpopulated salt lakes.

The interventionist avant-garde, such as groups like the Situationist International, with all its commitment to intervene in public life, also treated the wider public or community as a passive object, the least meaningful part of an artistic venue. One could say that in public art the public has for a long time been seen rather as an obstacle. This kind of thinking slowly began to change in the 1980s. The concept of space as a producer of social order rehabilitated public art by positioning it, in a number of ways, back in the pioneering fringe of the avant-garde.

Contemporary interventionist public art is not a monumental memory-landscape, nor a self-fulfilling *non-site*[1], but it participates in the production of space, as its conceptualization takes place through the community. In the current paper I will explore the role of location in the debate surrounding artistic intervention. Michel de Certeau's concept of *tactics* will be used as the theoretical framework for the analysis while expanding his ideas using spatial theories from Henri Lefebvre and Juri Lotman. Through case studies and theoretical discussion, I am going to propose three theses describing the combined effect of interventionist public art and the place of intervention.

To describe the practices under observation, I propose the term *interventionist public art*. This hybrid expression hints at its genealogical emanation from, on one hand, the debates

1 Ref. To: Robert Smithson.

surrounding public art, and on the other, from the intrusive media practices manifested in the 1990s: the *tactical media* movement[2] and the interventionists.[3]

Contemporary spatial practices, new genre public art

It can be stated that any social order strives for permanence, and also tries to deploy that in public. As public spaces have always been for the display of power and order[4], official representative public art has traditionally valued qualities like durability, continuity and clarity.

When the artist and critic Suzanne Lacy proposed *new genre public art*[5] in the 1980s, with which she marked a certain turn towards community-specificity, it had already become one of the foundations of social and cultural geography that space is socially produced, or constructed[6], and that spatial practice consists of a projection onto all aspects, elements and moments of social practice.[7] The change in conceptualizing the public space resulted in uncertainty, instability, ambiguity and impermanence becoming valued as the desired attributes of a vanguard, politically progressive artistic practice.[8] Accordingly, there have been calls to re-think artistic site-specificity, and to embrace its critical potential.[9] When stepping into a dialogue with a place, one steps into a dialogue with the social order constituting this place, a spectacular intrusion into public spaces

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2 *Tactical media* is a term obtained in the 1990s, first used by the net-art and hacker communities to mark activism based on new media; later authors have significantly widened the use of term and tactical media has become an umbrella term for various hybrid practices combining public art and activism.

3 Ref. To: *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*, curated by curator and critic Nato Thompson, in 2004 in Mass MoCA.

4 M. Miles, "Critical Spaces: Monuments and Changes." – *The Practice of Public Art.* Eds. C. Cartiere, S. Willis. New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 77.

5 S. Lacy, "Introduction: Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys." – *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Ed. S. Lacy, Bay Press, 1995, p. 19.

6 T. Unwin, "A Waste of Space? Towards a Critique of the Social Production of Space." – *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* 2000, vol. 25 (1), p. 11.

7 H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, p. 8.

8 M. Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002, p. 160.

9 See: K. Melchionne, "Re-Thinking Site-Specificity in Public Art: Some Critical and Philosophical Problems", *Art Criticism,* 1998, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 36–49; Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity." Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002

designated for other uses, and this inevitably makes a point even if the participants are not aiming to do so explicitly.[10]Although recognizing that in the context of public art the concept of community remains problematic,[11] curator and researcher Miwon Kwon states that in recent decades the focus of contemporary public art has shifted from artist to audience and from production to reception.[12] Several artists have indeed emphasised that they have no authoritarian control over their public works (nor do they desire any) but they set up an intrigue where they "then lay back and watch the consequences".[13] The goal of critical artistic interventions is not to express the critical thought, but to create the situation where, through public discussion, the critical thought could emerge.

Theoretical Framework – Critical spatial practices and the *tactics* of Michel de Certeau

When conceptualizing emerging artistic spatial practices be it *new genre public art,* the actions of *tactical media* or even *flash mobs*, several authors reach a common keyword – the *tactics* introduced by Michel de Certeau.[14]

In his influential book *L'invention du quotidien* (1980; *Practices of Everyday Life*, 1984) de Certeau describes the distinction between *strategy* and *tactics*. The former is characterized by the delimitation and possession of space. The idea here is to control the territory in order to build a basis for interaction with the outside world. Tactics on other hand is characterized by the lack of estate, these are operations in the "enemy's territory", on the ground of a foreign power. Tactics are the puns and pranks, oxymorons that take advantage of lucky moments, and current arrangements within the framework of power.

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10 G. Gore, "Flash Mob Dance and the Territorialisation of Urban Movement." – *Anthropological Notebooks* 2010, vol. 16 (3), p. 126.

11 M. Kwon, One Place After Another, p. 7.

12 M. Kwon, One Place After Another, p. 106.

13 J. Niesyto, "Integrieren/Vernetzen: Kampagnen im Zeichen des Netzwerkparadigmas – ein Paradoxon.", *Unternehmenskritische Kampagnen: Politischer Protest im Zeichen digitaler Kommunikation,* Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften / Springer Fachmedien, 2010, p. 305.

14 See: D. Garcia, G. Lovink, *The ABC of Tactical Media,* 1997, http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9705/msg00096.html (last checked 10. XII 2015); G. Gore, *Flash Mob Dance and the Territorialisation of Urban Movement*; J. Rendell, *Space, Place and Site in Critical Spatial Arts Practice.* [2008, pp. 58–59]; N. Thompson, *The Interventionists*. [2004, p. 21]; R. Raley, Tactical Media, pp. 15–16, 18.

Where strategic operations impose homogeneity, tactical counter-operations try to reopen the space for versatility and multitude.

What makes the concept of tactics so attractive to practitioners of public art is likely that while not far from Foucault's concept of *heterotopias,* or Bourdieu's *fields,* de Certeau provides an interesting corrective. He treats the social spaces as more open to human creativity and action.[15] Furthermore, although "tactical means" are largely based on the concept of *detournment*[16] first described by the Situationist International, de Certeau decisively rejects Guy Debord's pessimism, believing that there is still space for autonomous production, even when operating inside the framework determined by the hegemonic system.

It should be noted that de Certeau did not consider it particularly important whether the tactics be applied intentionally as a result of critical thought.[17] Some authors, therefore, have pointed out that contemporary critical interventionist artistic practices, such as tactical media, actually abandon de Certeau's approach: making tactics not a silent production by reading signs without changing them, but outlining the way in which active production can become tactical in contrast to the strategic mainstream media[18] – by hijacking advertising spaces, re-allocating brands, occupying the urban space through collective actions among others. As with de Certeau, the premise remains that the system can be resisted even if that system remains intact.[19]

Michel de Certeau's spatial practices, and spatial theories according to Henri Lefebvre and Juri Lotman

Michel de Certeau's thoughts are certainly inspiring, but his freestyle vagrant text refuses

15 D. Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, p. 213.

16 *Detournment* (from French meaning: to hijack, to divert) is the practice of using force as a resource against the same force. See also: J. Richardson, The Language of Tactical Media. – BalkonMagazine 2002, Autumn, no. 12, http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors2/richardsontext2.html (last checked 2. XII 2015).

17 N. Thompson, "Trespassing Relevance." – *The Interventionists: User's Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*. Eds. N. Thompson, G. Sholette. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004, p. 21.

18 J. Richardson, *The Language of Tactical Media*.

19 R. Raley, Tactical Media, p. 151.

to offer any clear structure or method for a more detailed analysis of interventionist spatial practices. Therefore, when searching for a theoretical foundation, one has to take a closer look at the authors and texts that de Certeau makes reference to – most notably the works of Henri Lefebvre.

Similar to de Certeau, Lefebvre describes *strategy* as associated with the State and Capital, property and power, control and the consumption of space. In respect to the latter, Lefebvre sees a potential counterweight in the local community. Two powers remain in potential conflict as their use of public space has different objectives: the State and Capital want to distribute it for ideological or commercial purposes; the local community wants to use it as a place of leisure.[20] Top-down urban planning can evoke grassroots counter-actions – attempts to *re-appropriate* the public space. Through these (rather symbolic) occupations, the theatricalized and dramatized space emerges[21], which Lefebvre calls the counter-space (*contre-espace*). The counter-space often stimulates the existing space by presenting its limitations via parody[22], revealing the repressions and boundaries that State bureaucracy has tried to hide. Once the restrictions have become obvious, the local community and centralized power can commence negotiations: an opportunity for the innovative organization of space has been provided. The borderline recognized in the space conflict is, therefore, the line that simultaneously describes the point of collision and negotiation. Being positioned at the border, moving near it or crossing it is always accompanied with an outbreak of narrative activity: the border articulates.[23]

When discussing *boundaries*, de Certeau refers to corresponding works by Juri Lotman, for whom the boundary in its essence is the sum of translatable filters[24] via which every culture communicates with the outside world. When a culturally alien element penetrates the border, translation and interpretation processes are activated; before the cultural space is able to embrace the alien-semiotic element, it has to decode it, translate it into one of the languages of its internal space; facts must be semioticized.[25]

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20 H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 359.
21 H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 391.
22 H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 382.
23 M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Berkley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 128.
24 J. Lotman, "On the Semiosphere." S*ign Systems Studies* 33.1, 2005, p. 208
25 J. Lotman, *On the Semiosphere*, p. 209

Placing the aforementioned into the context of art, one can state that if an artistic intervention, carried out in the public space, produces a strong response, it shows that the given action marks a point (line) of collision in the existing spatial conflict.

As emphasized, contemporary public art practices strive to evoke social debate. When developing Lotman's boundary-concept, a situation could be described whereby an artistic action – the alien-semiotic element – has forced itself onto the borderline of a spatial conflict, places itself on the border, marks the border, while at the same time, refuses to cross onto either side. In such a case the decoding becomes more complicated, as the pre-existing decoding mechanisms – for example, the criminal code – are not useful. The more ambivalent the intervention, the more it offers options for interpretation – to the point that decoding becomes replaced by the construction of new meanings. In the context of public art, this means that the desired "birth of critical thought" is not being caused by a clear critical message but rather by ambiguity and interpretability.

Spatial practices – Artistic interventions in Freedom (Vabaduse) Square in Tallinn, 2001–2010

Freedom Square is one of the most socially sensitive and symbolically charged locations in Tallinn. Situated at the heart of the city but just outside the "preserved" Old Town, it has been subject to many restructuring plans, and according to political and ideological changes, it has repeatedly been renamed and re-renamed.[26] Monuments have been installed and removed; it is surrounded by a number of emblematic buildings and institutions. Furthermore, Freedom Square has traditionally been the main place for State celebrations and institutionalized events such as military parades. Being prone to top-down planning, makes it also receptive to counter-actions from the grassroots level.

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26 Under the dominion of the Russian Empire, the former Hay Market was named Peter's Plaza (1910); when the Republic of Estonia was established, it was renamed Freedom Plaza (1923), then Freedom Square (1933); during the Soviet occupation it was renamed Victory Square (1941); the same year, during the German occupation, back to Freedom Square; under the annexation by the Soviet Union, it was again re-named Victory Square (1948); after the Estonian Declaration of Sovereignty, the place was once again named Freedom Square (1989).
(The Institute of the Estonian Language: http://www.eki.ee/knab/tallinn2.htm).

The following case studies do not represent a complete list of artistic interventions in Freedom Square during the first decade of the 2000s, but the most disputed examples.

NOW / HERE[27]

25 March 2004
Location: Kaarli boulevard between Freedom Square and the city government building, near the Freedom Clock monument.
Authors: graphic design students from the Estonian Academy of Arts
Number of participants: approximately 20

Event

On 25 March 2004, at noon, a small unsanctioned demonstration took place in Tallinn: a few dozen students with posters and banners stood in front of the City Government building. What was unusual was that the posters and banners were empty, white. As unsanctioned demonstrations were prohibited, it raised some questions. The press was intrigued, the demonstrators stood silently, the city officials were confused, the police patrols arrived but did not take any action. A police spokesperson responded to journalists that the police did not consider it necessary to intervene, as "we will not interpret it as a public offense because people also gather in a similar way when they are waiting for a bus."[28] The picket lasted about two hours, then the students marched back to school. On the same evening, the picketers were invited to a television talk-show, where they also remained mute.

27 The information here is based on media coverage and documentation of interviews with Kristjan Mändmaa, Serge Rompza and Anders Hofgaard (held in 2010 August) and on personal recollections.

28 "Tühjade loosungite vabaduskella juures." (Empty Banners by the Freedom Clock) – *BNS* 25. III 2004, http://www.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/eesti/tuhjade-loosungite-vabaduskella-juures.d?id=7487560 (last checked 2. XII 2015).

Fig.. 1-1; 1-2

NOW/HERE

Copyright: NODE Berlin Oslo in collaboration with Kristjan Mändmaa and students from the Estonian Academy of Arts. Photos: Peeter Langovits/Postimees

Background and follow-up

The picket was the outcome of a workshop "Means of production" organized by the Graphic Design Department of the Estonian Academy of Arts, supervised by assistant professor Kristjan Mändmaa and guest lecturers Serge Rompza and Anders Hofgaard. The aim of the workshop was to investigate how to operate as a parasite on existing media.[29]

29 See also: J. Saar, "Parasiidid Eesti meedias." (Parasites in Estonian media) – *Eesti Päevaleht* 25. III 2004, http://epl.delfi.ee/news/kultuur/parasiidid-eesti-meedias.d?id=50979917 (last checked 2. XII 2015).

Serge Rompza and Anders Hofgaard: "We knew that one has to ask for permission in order to make a demonstration in Tallinn and, in one case, a single demonstrator had been removed by the police for not having applied for permission. The action poses questions to the system: How do you react to a group of people performing a demonstration without any content? Is this a demonstration? Our main goal was the action itself, and then to see what reactions it provoked. We thought the place was interesting because it is politically laden, something which is interesting combined with an action that is stripped of meaning."

Kristjan Mändmaa: "Certainly, there we had an idea. The same night we made banners and posters, in the morning borrowed a car and transported our equipment to the proximity. We had graphic design students and also some architects, who found it interesting and joined in."

The event was covered by the Baltic News Service, by a number of TV channels and the major dailies. While the press were perplexed, internet commentators came up with explanations: according to the majority, this picket was interpreted as a protest against the newly-erected Freedom Clock Monument ("which is as pointless as are the empty banners" etc.).[30] Others saw the empty banners as saying that life today for youngsters is empty, or that higher education – the demonstrators seemed to be students – has become obsolete. Even more worrying explanations were given: some commentators read the blank surfaces as a message that the Estonian language is dying out (there is only about one million Estonian-speakers in the world). Only a few guessed a connection with the law and regulations for public demonstrations.

Analysis

NOW/HERE was informed by a previous event (single demonstrator mention by Rompza and Hofgaard above) that received only a brief note in the media, but for the mindful

30 The Freedom Clock Monument was meant to be a meeting place and a clock tower, but – as people complained in commentaries – it is unusable as it is located in the middle of heavy traffic and the clock-face is "too small and hard to read". This has led to popular accusations that on the pretext of a public good, the city government hypocritically used taxpayers money to erect a monument for itself.

observer it revealed the potential for a rhetorical deviation from the official spatial policy. The location was chosen because of its proximity to the main administrative institution, the offices of the City Government. Referring to de Certeau and Bülow and their approach via tactics, it is possible to say that the demonstrators literally "acted under the sight of the enemy". The tactics involved placing themselves exactly between what is allowed and what is forbidden by law, thus making the restriction both actual and, at the same time, questionable. The tactics were successful; the boundary revealed itself in the form of the police officers who, although not finding any illegal activity, remained in place until the end of the happening.

For the wider audience, the spectacular presence of the law enforcement personnel certainly confirmed the importance of what was going on. The less the officials were able to offer explanations, the more discussions and creative interpretations emerged on internet forums and news commentaries.

It is worth noting that while the demonstrators (and likely also the officials) saw the legal restriction as the line of conflict, for the wider audience it instead brought the official monumental politics into critical focus. Regardless of the original intentions of the authors/organizers, the community interpreted the intervention in the context of its location. Considering all the other interpretations discussed in public, it is possible to say that this deliberately meaningless event caused an outbreak of narratives: those empty banners became filled with multiple, equally significant messages.

~~CAR~~ PARK OF FREEDOM[31]

15 May 2006
Location: Freedom Square car park
Authors: Prussakov's Bicycle Community
Number of participants: approximately 50

31 This information is based on media coverage and documentation of interviews with Marten Kaevats and Erko Valk (held in August 2010) and personal recollections.

Event

Around 8 am, a group of youngsters entered the Freedom Square car park. They were pedestrians or on bicycles, some carried flowerpots or picnic baskets. At the entrance they took a ticket from the unmanned ticket-machine and then chose a place to park their bicycle or flowerpot or beach towel.

When the car park attendant asked them to leave, they replied that they have the right to stay as they have taken tickets. Then the police was called to resolve the situation. To begin with, the officers tried to find out who was in charge and what was the goal.

> Marten Kaevats: "With the police we used the flower-child tactics, it always works. With bright eyes we explained that this is a picnic, and showed them our tickets."

The opportunity to intervene was seen by the police only when one girl, participating in a picnic, unrolled her white scarf with large letters written on it saying FREEDOM ~~CAR~~ PARK (VABADUSE PARK~~LA~~). The officers then began thinking that this may be a protest-banner and that it may be an unauthorized public demonstration. To be sure, they asked the girl to join them in the nearby offices of the City Government to let the officials decide. The official in charge took some time to think and then stated that the scarves with texts on them are not prohibited. The police officers then left the picnickers alone.

> Marten Kaevats: "There was one with brains, some higher-ranking officer. He got what was going on but he also got that there is not much they could do about it, we had tickets, everything was by the law."

The situation became tense around noon when more cars started to arrive to park. The picnickers refused to give up their places; there were arguments and even some small physical confrontations. There were already many newsgroups covering the strange picnic, and when one enraged driver attacked a television cameraman – an incident which was later widely distributed in the media – then after that the car park was officially closed. The session went on until about 5 pm when the participants decided to leave. The question was raised about paying for the parking tickets – some actually paid; most left

without paying.

Fig. 2-1; 2-2
~~CAR~~ PARK OF FREEDOM
Photos: Martin Sookael

Background and follow-up

Prussakov's Bicycle Community had for a long time lobbied to transform Freedom Square into a pedestrian area. In co-operation with the city government they had already established a Car-free Day[32] and there was even an official decision to relocate the car park underground. Still, things were moving slowly.

Erko Valk: "We had heard all kinds of promises before … and after all, it felt like fun."

32 Tallinn joined the Europe-wide Car Free Day in 2000, Prussakov's Bicycle Community joined the panel in 2003 and was chosen as the main organizer of Tallinn's Car Free Day in 2004 (https://oigusaktid.tallinn.ee/?id=3003&aktid=97796)

The Bicycle Community decided to carry their action out during the official Day of Tallinn, especially as the theme for the day that year was the "Green City". Mayors from European cities were expected to visit; the schedule also included the representatives taking a walk from the offices of the City Government to the Town Hall Square, crossing Freedom Square on the way.

Tallinn city government avoided this situation by organizing buses which, adopting a circuitous route to avoid Freedom Square, carried the high-ranking guests from the government's offices to the Old Town. Prussakov still managed to indirectly hijack a press conference that evening, as a large proportion of the journalists' questions concerned the incident on Freedom Square.

The picnic inspired quite a broad media discussion. The editorial in the daily Eesti Päevaleht asked whether it was time to abandon the demonstration-prohibiting law, referring to the strange "scarf incident".[33] The mayor's advisor commented to the daily Postimees that "there may not be many complaints about the content of the Prussakov Community action, yet the chosen form was inappropriate".[34]

No legal action was taken by the managers of the car park to recover the unpaid parking fees.

A documentary about the car park picnic was first screened at the Tallinn Art Hall in 2007. [35]

Freedom Square underwent a redesign in 2008, the car park was moved underground and the square was opened to pedestrians.

Analysis

The spatial conflict behind the action in the car park refers literally to Henri Lefebvre's description of a conflict between the State power and the local community, where the former's goal is to commodify the public space, while the latter wants to use it as a place

33 Mäss Vabaduse parklas. Juhtkiri. (Rebellion in the Freedom Car Park. Editorial.) – *Eesti Päevaleht* 16. V 2006, http://epl.delfi.ee/news/arvamus/juhtkiri-mass-vabaduse-parklas.d?id=51039151 (vaadatud 2. XII 2015).

34 K. Otti, "Noored protestisid lillede, jalgrataste ja piknikuga parkla vastu." (With flowers, bicycles and a picnic, the youngsters protested against the car park.) – *Postimees* 16. V 2006.

35 Tõnis Kenkmaa, *Aktsioon* (2006), video, 18'20".

of leisure. The public space was re-appropriated via parody; tactics were used to strictly follow the law as formally prescribed, while redefining it through a rhetorical activity.[36]

However, this case allows us to highlight some problems in relation to Lefebvre's take on spatial conflict. Although Lefebvre clearly emphasizes the heterogeneity of the community of everyday users, he describes the conflict between the centralized and local powers as dualistic. Therefore, many authors – the above mentioned Miwon Kwon[37], also Rosalind Deutsche[38], Kristen Forkert[39] and others – when talking about inclusive public art, have found it important to stress that concepts like c*ommunity*, *audience, public interest* and so on, should not be treated as self-evident nor unambiguous. In the case of the car park picnic, in addition to administrative power, there are at least two groups of daily users: pedestrians and drivers. As Freedom Square was used by car drivers on a daily basis, it is far from self-evident why the occupying pedestrians became the "local voice". The course of events was certainly influenced by the relatively long history of this particular confrontation.[40]

In addition, I would suggest that **how** the competing groups used the place was no less significant: while the pedestrians occupying the square wanted to stay there, the car-drivers wanted to use it as a transitional space – something what cultural theoretician Marc Augé calls a non-place (*non-lieux*). As Augé notes, the non-place is the opposite of a Utopia.[41] But the utopian vision is exactly what, according to Lefebvre, allows the local community to intervene in the organization of space. The picnickers may have been occupiers but the space qualified them as a local community, and legitimate discussion partners in the debate over spatial politics.

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36 Although one has to admit that when the picnickers left car park in the end mostly without paying for their parking, this somewhat corrupted the virtue of their chosen tactics.

37 See: M. Kwon, *One Place After Another.* Pp. 94-95.

38 See: R. Deutsche, "Tilted Arc and the Uses of Democracy." – *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996, pp. 257–269.

39 See: K. Forkert, "Tactical Media and Art Institutions: Some Questions." – *Third Text,* 2008, vol. 22 (5), p. 592.

40 Tallinn City Government had decided already in 1997 to transform the junction and car park area in Freedom Square into a pedestrian area. Yet what followed was a decade of remarkably inconsistent and publicly criticized planning, during which the "temporary car park" stood as the most visible sign of the city government's failure.

41 M. Augé, *Non-places. Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity.* London: Verso, 1995, p 111.

FREEDOM STATUETTE[42]

2 – 3 March 2008

Location: Freedom Square

Authors: 4 students from Tallinn University with help from one architecture student from the Estonian Academy of Arts

Event

In spring 2008, part of Freedom Square was closed to create the construction site for the grand War of Independence Victory Column *aka* Freedom Statue.[43] The plan was to build the monument by the end of 2008.[44] But then, on 2 March, the Freedom Monument was there, albeit as a more humble presence: at a scale of 1:8 and made not from concrete, steel and glass, but from wood, cardboard and foil.

Confusion emerged as the monument appeared as it should, albeit in miniature. The daily *Postimees* published photographs and tried to obtain comments from the government officials in charge of the construction work. But they could not explain the premature appearance of the Freedom Statue, confirming only that it is not an official temporary solution, as speculated by the journalists, and that neither the state nor the city was behind this statuette. The officials interviewed could not also take a position, either to approve or condemn the happening. The Minister of Defence Jaak Aaviksoo under whose personal jurisdiction the construction of the memorial fell, also remained cryptic when commenting on television that "this is probably some student joke", adding that when he was a student, he also sometimes did similar jokes.

The next day, the Freedom Statuette was gone.

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42 Information here is based on media coverage and documentation of interviews with Argo Kerb and Rasmus Kask (held in 2011 July) and on personal recollections.

43 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_of_Independence_Victory_Column.

44 Opening of monument was first planned to 28th November 2008 but on the July 2008 the Ministry of Defense decided to postpone it into next year, opening ceremony was held in Victory Day, 23th June 2009.

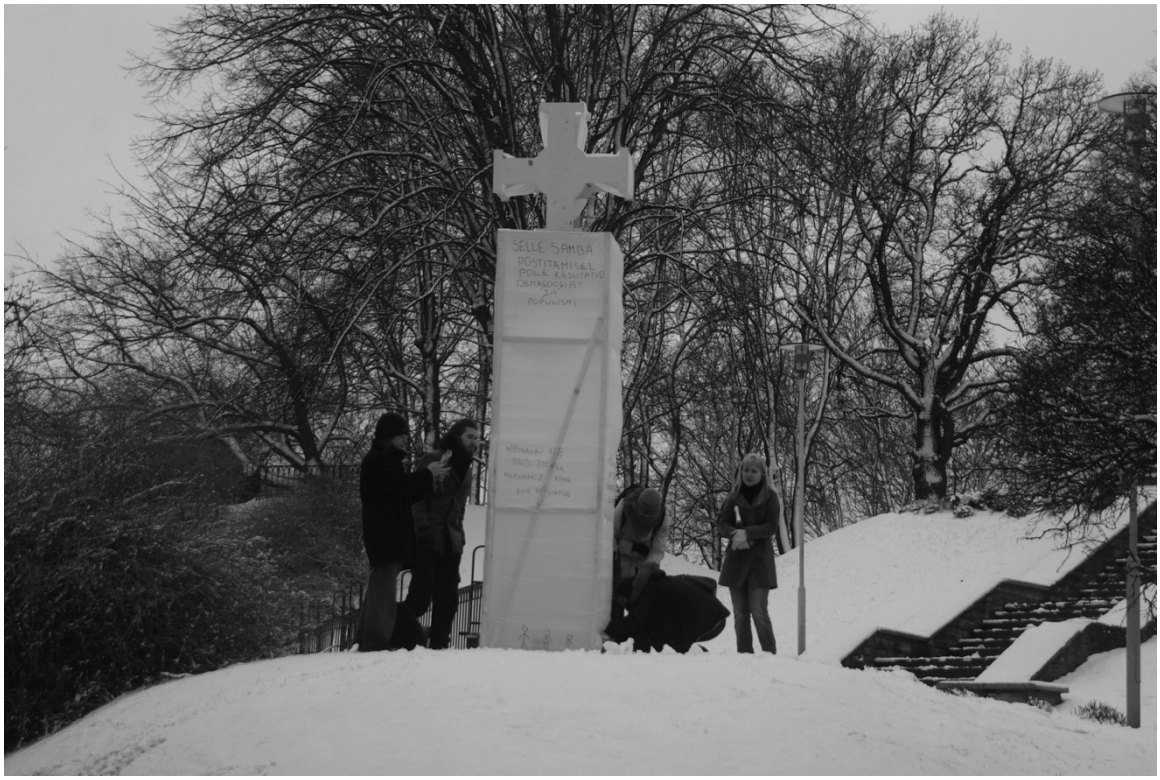

Fig. 3-1

FREEDOM STATUETTE

Photos: private collection of Argo Kerb,

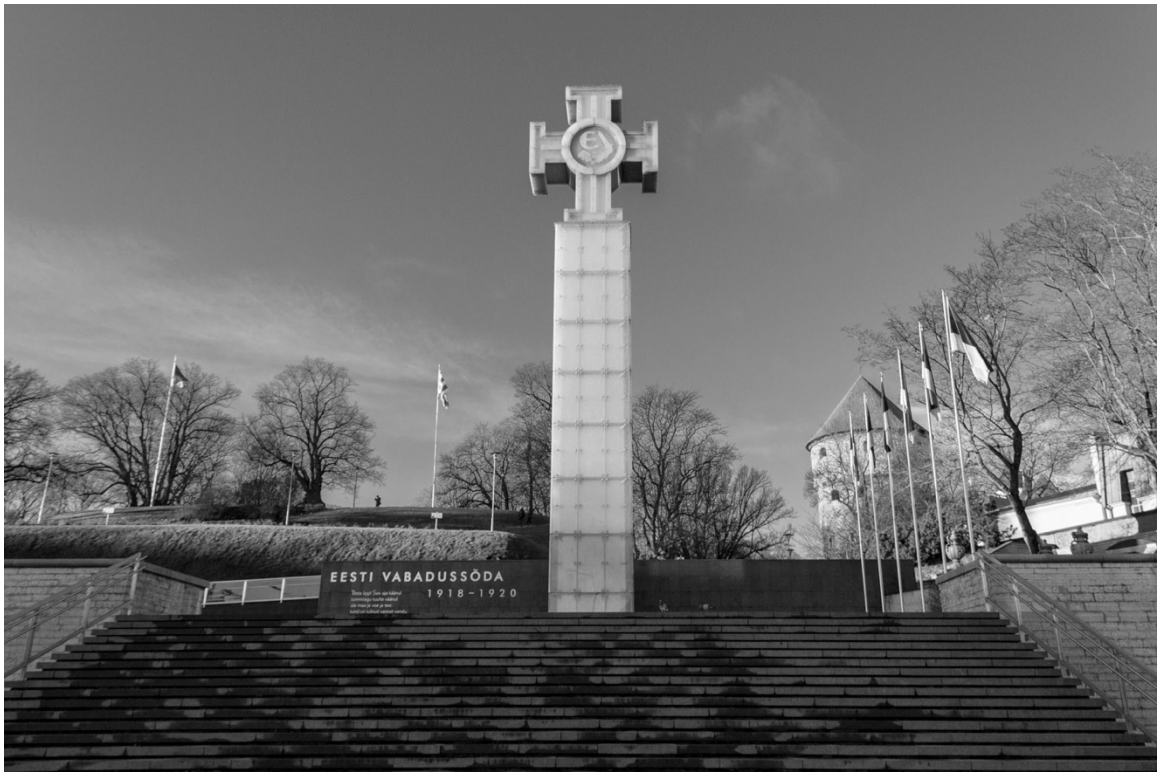

Fig. 3-2
War of Independence Victory Column
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Background and follow-up

In 2006, the Estonian government announced a plan to build a memorial monument for Freedom Square. The solution for the monument that was selected was widely criticized, especially by intellectuals, artists and architects. The government maintained a hard line, stating that there will be no more discussion, but the heated debate in the media went on, both supporters and critics wrote articles and published petitions.

> Argo Kerb: “This whole thing was absurd. At the university cafe, with a few fellow students, we had an idea how to fuel this absurdity even more.”

The parts were prepared and then, on a quiet Sunday morning, they were transported to

the construction site, where then the statuette was quickly assembled.

This self-initiated monument was removed the following night. When questioned by journalists, the state police spokesman stated that the Police Board did not have anything to do with that and suggested the journalist ask the municipal police. But the latter had a similar reply.[45] After a few hours both police offices made a joint announcement that the statuette had been "accidentally removed" by people in the employment of the city maintenance and garbage collection company "at their own initiative".

Analysis

The public competition for the memorial monument was the second serious attempt after regaining independence to find a proper monumental solution for Freedom Square. The previous competition, held in 2002, provided quite a discreet open-ended environment.[46] The current jury, mostly consisting of officials, instead preferred a single dominant monumental landmark, praising the qualities of the winning project as being "concrete and unambiguous".[47] Those qualities, as one can easily see in the context of recent debates about public art – briefly discussed above – are rather obvious drawbacks. Where there was originally room for open divergent dialogue, the official planning showed an interest in unequivocal dominance, thus efficiently establishing the grounds for conflict. As in the previous examples, the interventionist tactics were to meticulously follow the official precepts. Ironically, the counter-monument confronted the authorities with a paradoxical dilemma – condemn the statuette and you condemn the official planning, approve it and you agree with the inherent criticism. Therefore, an official response was never articulated. Even more revealing was the quiet disposal of the Freedom statuette – without any argument or valid justification. Borrowing an expression from Henri Lefebvre, one could say that the statuette-intervention swept away the bureaucratically maintained illusion of rationality, concealing the suppressive practices of power.

45 L. Luhats, "Isetehtud sammas kadus Harjumäelt öö varjus." (Self-made monument disappears over night) – *Kalev meedia*, http://www.just24.ee/est/?news=926678 (not available).

46 Memorial space "Opaal", authors Maria Pukk and Ivar Lubjak.

47 A. Põder (Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Estonia, head of the jury), Kaua tehtud – kaunikene? (Beauty – takes time?) – *Eesti Päevaleht* 29. VIII 2007.

FREEDOM POSTERS[48]

13/14 March 2008

Location: centre of Tallinn

Authors: group of students from Estonian Academy of Arts.

Event

It was less then two weeks after the Freedom Statuette incident, when posters containing VABADUS (*FREEDOM*) in large text appeared in the centre of town. Below the main text was smaller print: "Announcing the competition to find the best solution", the rest of the poster was left empty. Some of these posters already had texts and drawings added (mostly concerning the Freedom Monument),[49] others offered their empty surface for the public to respond. Altogether there were 900 posters in A1 format, plastered to walls and hoardings and also covering many official advertising spaces.

The Municipality of Tallinn informed both the state and municipal police, and a note was sent to all property owners reminding them that according to the city maintenance restrictions, they are required to keep their property clean from garbage. Over the week that followed, the Freedom Posters were progressively torn down, some still remaining in remote locations.

48 Information here is based on media coverage and documentation of interviews with Flo Kasearu (held in October 2007, July 2011) and on personal recollections.

49 These additions were made by the authors of the poster campaign themselves to provide an example and encourage the general public.


VABADUS
VABADUS
RISTIK-
HEIN
VABADUS
KEVAD ON
AEG UUEKS
ALGUSEKS
VABADUS


VABADUS
VABADUS
VABADUS
VABADUS

Fig. 4-1; 4-2
FREEDOM POSTERS
Photos: from private collection of Flo Kasearu

Background and follow-up

The poster campaign was the work of a group of students from the Estonian Academy of Arts, funded by the Student Council and later also presented as coursework.

> Flo Kasearu: "Places close to the area for the Freedom Cross (another popular name for War of Independence Victory Column – *M.T.*) were chosen as they are most central and visible. The goal was to comment upon the saga around the monument ... to how to be heard."

In the press, the posters were at first called advertisements and speculations suggested that this is "some kind of tricky ad campaign, the meaning of which will probably soon be revealed"; one expert suggested it was the work of "some kind of underground advertising agency".[50] The prevailing opinion was that this was a campaign by those against the Freedom Statue. One journalist from the daily *SL Õhtuleht* turned to the Estonian Association of Architects[51] – as many architects were against the monument – but the association stated that they had not ordered any such campaign. So the exact nature of the poster campaign remained a mystery.

The disappearance of the Freedom posters over the following days sparked a public response: in internet commentaries, many interpreted it metaphorically as the restriction of civil freedoms characteristic of a police state. When officials tried to escape the blame, noting that the posters were removed by property-owners, it soon turned back on them in the form of the popularly acknowledged problems associated with the privatization of the

50 A. Viivik, "Tallinna ilmus kummaline vabadust kuulutav reklaam." (Curious freedom-declaring advertising emerged in Tallinn) – *SL Õhtuleht* 14. III 2008, http://www.ohtuleht.ee/270995 (last checked 2. XII 2015).
51 *Ibid*.

public space.

No criminal case was initiated against an unauthorized campaign, the police spokesman explaining that "although these posters did pollute the urban space, they did not call [people] to violence or rioting."[52] In response to demands from the owners of the spoiled advertising places, the municipal police initiated misdemeanour proceedings, but no one was ever prosecuted.

Analysis

The case of the Freedom posters is similar to the Freedom Statuette intervention. In addition, it makes it possible to highlight how connected spatial and linguistic practices are.

The Freedom Monument competition occurred in 2002, the War of Independence Victory Column competition was in 2006, but in public, titles like Freedom Monument, Freedom Statue and Freedom Column were used instead.[53] For the majority of the public, the precise official name (and the resulting narrower semantic field) of the memorial was recognized only when the final project was announced. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to compare this with renaming.[54] The semantic conflict would have been avoided if the official communication had been reoriented from the rhetoric of *freedom* to the rhetoric of *victory* – remarkably, this was not done. It can be assumed that the obstacle to that was history, or, as some might call it, a *memory of spac*e: replacing Freedom with Victory had already been a Soviet practice.[55]

The government tried to resolve the signifying conflict using rhetorical argument: Freedom was equated with Victory and the opponents of this particular monumental solution were identified as the enemies of freedom.[56] That allowed the authorities to

52 A. Viivik, "Vabadust kuulutavate plakatite autorid on siiani tabamata." (Authors of freedom-declaring posters still not captured) – *SL Õhtuleht* 15. III 2008, http://www.ohtuleht.ee/271226/ (last checked 2. XII 2015).

53 The semantic confusion is best indicated on the official homepage of the War of Independence Victory Column, which uses name *freedommonument* on its domain http://www.vabadusemonument.ee/. See also: *Vabaduse monument, vabadussammas, Vabadussõja monument – milline ja kelle jaoks?* (Freedom monument, freedom column, War of Independence Monument – what and for whom?) – *Sirp* 18. VIII 2006, pp 5–7.

54 See: http://www.vabadusemonument.ee/uudised/2008/02/03/10704.html (in Estonian, last checked 2. IV 2015).

55 See: footnote No. 26.

56 See for example: I. Pärnamäe, Võidusammas nagu riik. (Victory Column like State) – *Postimees* 21.VI

marginalize the critical voices but at the same time it revealed even more strikingly the state's attempt to replace the polysemy in the public space with "one correct meaning". In the given context, the Freedom posters acted as a tactical counter-measure to reopen the public space to versatility and multitude. Freedom was symbolically released for free use.

The answer to the posters from the municipal authorities was the same as in the case of the statuette: removal, without entering into the discussion. Such silent suppression, however, did not go without attention, and ultimately, it added significant dramatic, political and critical depth to the poster-intervention. The unexpected appearance of the Freedom posters followed by the even more unexpected loss of the Freedom posters revealed to a wide audience numerous spatial-political power-struggles and restrictions, and provoked discussion in both mainstream and social media.

General analysis

Contemporary public art is about open social dialogue. Therefore, it is appropriate to take a closer look at the public meaning-making following artistic interventions. In the case studies provided here, one can distinguish three interpretative instances: official bureaucracy, the press and public opinion (as expressed on social media and commentary sites). All of them influenced each other but also had their distinct interpretative logic.

The official reactions to the artistic interventions were restrained. Official representatives clearly tried to avoid public confrontations: there were no unequivocal condemnations, no one was arrested or prosecuted. However, it is remarkable that in the official rhetoric, the artistic interventions in the public space were only referred to as "pollution" or "debris" – the only aspect worthy of comment was their "inappropriate form". At the state level, these grassroots interventions were not interpreted as acts of communication, but as the misuse of the urban space. Based on the causal relationship between the revelations on the spatial conflict and the spatial (and more broadly – societal) innovation, pointed out by Lefebvre, one can say that the official interpretations were based on the desire to maintain the *status quo* and avoid any social dialogue.

2011.

The press focused on the sole criminal and scandal, too often dismissing the context and content of the spatial-political protest. The journalists described the scenery and forwarded their questions to officials, and competent analyses were rare. On the other hand, the uncertainty displayed by the mainstream press may have contributed to further public discussion: photo reportages fuelled debate in news commentaries, interviews with officials provoked the latter to interpret the irritatingly ambivalent interventions, and in this way helped reveal connections and contradictions in the official spatial politics.

In terms of public opinion, it was quite crucial whether the event was discussed in the news and how. Under ready-made categories, like *contemporary art, advertising campaign, theatre* and so on, commentators tended to express their already well-established attitudes. Referring to the location had a different effect. The commentators then tended to comprehend the wider background of the event, and noticed connections with issues associated with the urban space and living conditions.[57] In summary, it is possible to assert that when the press identified the event according to some category (e.g. art, advertising), this reduced public discussion, although highlighting the location contributed to wider critical thinking.

As stressed earlier, the goal of contemporary interventionist public art is not to express a critical statement, but to let different opinions emerge. The artistic interventions observed here certainly did that and, significantly, even more: not only did different opinions arise but even different issues to the extent that some interventions obtained meanings that were unforeseen by the artists behind them.

As interventionist art practices are meaningfully open-ended, an eloquent yet unarticulated event can be treated as an *empty signifier* that does not have its own symbolic value, and therefore, cannot be accounted for directly. Instead, it must be posited on the basis of a prior requirement for coherence between signification and knowledge.[58] In regard to public art, its basis is the public space. Henry Lefebvre may describe spatial conflict as a clear-cut confrontation, but the public space itself, according

57 It has to be noted that the same event in the same place acquires a different symbolic context depending on whether the location is referred to as, for example, downtown, Freedom Square or the front yard of City Government Office.

58 C. Diehl, "The Empty Space in Structure Theories of the Zero from Gauthiot to Deleuze." – *diacritics* 2008, vol. 38 (3), lk 108.

to him, is a "draft, repeatedly redrawn", a network of overlapping and intersecting constraints, a mesh of potential stories. Therefore, artistic intervention taking place in the public space can end up marking different spatial conflicts, and both evident and hidden restrictions. Which one arises as most urgent and delivers its narrative potential, depends on the particular situation.[59]

Conclusion

This paper has introduced the theoretical debate surrounding contemporary public art, and in light of the latter, has analysed a number of artistic interventions that have taken place at one exact location. Based on the discussion and the case studies, I propose three theses describing the combined effect of interventionist public art and the place of the intervention:

1. The prerequisite for an artistic intervention to attract public interest is a pre-existing spatial conflict.
2. The prerequisite for a public discussion is that the artistic intervention stays exactly on the collision line: does not take sides, express articulated agendas or trespass the boundaries stated by law.
3. The more acute a spatial conflict is and the more ambivalent the artistic intervention is, the more significant and meaningful the outcome (during which, the artistic intervention itself may obtain numerous new, originally unintended, meanings).

The presented theses are grounded on the idea that interventionist public art offers spatial and hyper-textual networks, as well as networks of relational aesthetics that combine various media. The purpose is to create an event, and therefore, the interventionist public art practices are closer to happenings or performances than to sculptural and monumental

59 For example, researcher Gregory Bowden describes how in the US during the Gulf War many street art works were identified as anti-war protests, even though they did not carry any war-related imagery or texts. See: G. Bowden, "Radical Exclusions, Empty Signifiers and an Anti-War Genre." – *Social Semiotics* 2009, vol. 19 (4), p 389–403.

practices. Interventions carried out in the urban space should not be viewed independently from their location, nor the everyday vitalizing practices, nor the ensuing media coverage, as in itself it only represents an indicator for public discussion.

Critical interventions stand as markers on the line of collision between the owners and users of the place. The tactics do not disregard the stated restrictions, but rather re-postulate the official order and rhetoric, so that the hidden limitations of the public space are made apparent. The ambiguity of these interventions makes them immune to quick legal suppression, and thereby, open opportunities for discussion, which hold the promise of innovation in the production of space, and ultimately – in the utopian dimension of Lefebvre – innovation in the organization of society.

Contemporary public art's ambition to participate in the production of space also has another side: artistic interventions find themselves at the mercy of the place. The mechanisms constituting the production of space, determine the process of meaning-making, accelerating and directing the critical discussion. To paraphrase the maxim that society produces space and space produces society, one might say that an artistic intervention produces meaningfulness of place and the place produces meaningfulness of intervention.

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