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Co-performing City: An Urban-Topographic Rotation as an Act of Reclaiming Public Spaces

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Co-performing City: An Urban-Topographic Rotation as an Act of Reclaiming Public Spaces

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Abstract

In the summer of 2023, the creators of the immersive multimedia walking performance *Novi Sad, the Illusive Haven*, enacted an urban-topographic rotation between two public spaces of Novi Sad. This was inspired by Janez Kocijančič's conceptual artwork *Project 3p4a2k* (1971), in which several public spaces in Novi Sad rotate their positions and functions as a "creative-aesthetic act," otherwise impossible in reality.

The performance thematically focused on the loss of the social dimension of public spaces in cities undergoing transition, where commercial interests progressively reshape urban life in favour of private capital, rather than the needs of the people. Aiming to *reclaim public spaces* through socially engaged art, the action involved staging the city beach (Štrand) in the centrally located public square (Katolička porta). It was conceptualised as an occupation act, within the framework of filming a scene for a multimedia performance.

Drawing on the concept of *spatial co-performativity*, the paper analyses this specific scene of the performance, focusing on the role the public space acquires through its performative dialogue with the action. By introducing an unexpected activity of sunbathing, into the busy pedestrian zone of the city centre, where dancers, actors, and passersby took on the roles of beachgoers, the loosely staged action unfolded over four hours of filming. In the final performance, the video served as a fictional, surreal layer confronted with the everyday reality of the square, while the act of producing the video itself functioned as a *subversive performative rupture* within the everyday conventions of this public space, making it an integral and active protagonist of the overall performance.

Keywords: co-performative space; conceptual public art; immersive performance

From Concept to Enactment: Revisiting the Urban-Topographic Rotation

The late 1960s and early '70s marked a vibrant era for avant-garde and conceptual art in Vojvodina, with the building of Youth Tribune¹ in Novi Sad playing a crucial role in establishing the movement. Many artists focused on public spaces as sources of inspiration, starting points, or key motifs in their work. As Sonja Jankov analyses, these practices “emphasise the public character of public spaces and return to them something that is often forgotten - that public spaces are at the core of the freedom of connecting, freedom of expression, freedom of movement” (Jankov, 2024, p.50). One such artwork—*Project 3p4a2k* (Kocijančić, 1971), subtitled the *Urban-topographic rotation + comprehensiveness of coloring*, explored the idea of moving and shifting the positions and functions of three public spaces in Novi Sad, one of which was the Youth Tribune and the adjacent Square Katolička porta. In describing the work, which was accompanied by a simple sketch depicting the rotation, Kocijančić states: “What is impossible according to spatio-temporal, geographical, physical, sociological and other laws become achievable only in the sphere of the project, as a type of creative-aesthetic act” (Kocijančić, 1971, p.14).

In 2023, a group of artists enacted the urban-topographic rotation,² relocating a city beach (Štrand) to the centrally located public square Katolička porta, which had featured in the original 1971 project.

The Occupation Act

The context of this enactment was shaped by a multidisciplinary artistic project that addressed the diminishing social dimension of public spaces in transitioning cities,³ where unregulated neoliberal capitalism increasingly prioritizes private capital over the communal needs of urban inhabitants, undermining the essence of public spaces. Katolička porta, a central square in Novi Sad, served as a paradigmatic example of this condition. In recent years, the city's most picturesque square has become devoid of public furniture, making way for the spread of privately owned cafes that occupy the space.

¹ Serbian name of the institution: Tribina mladih

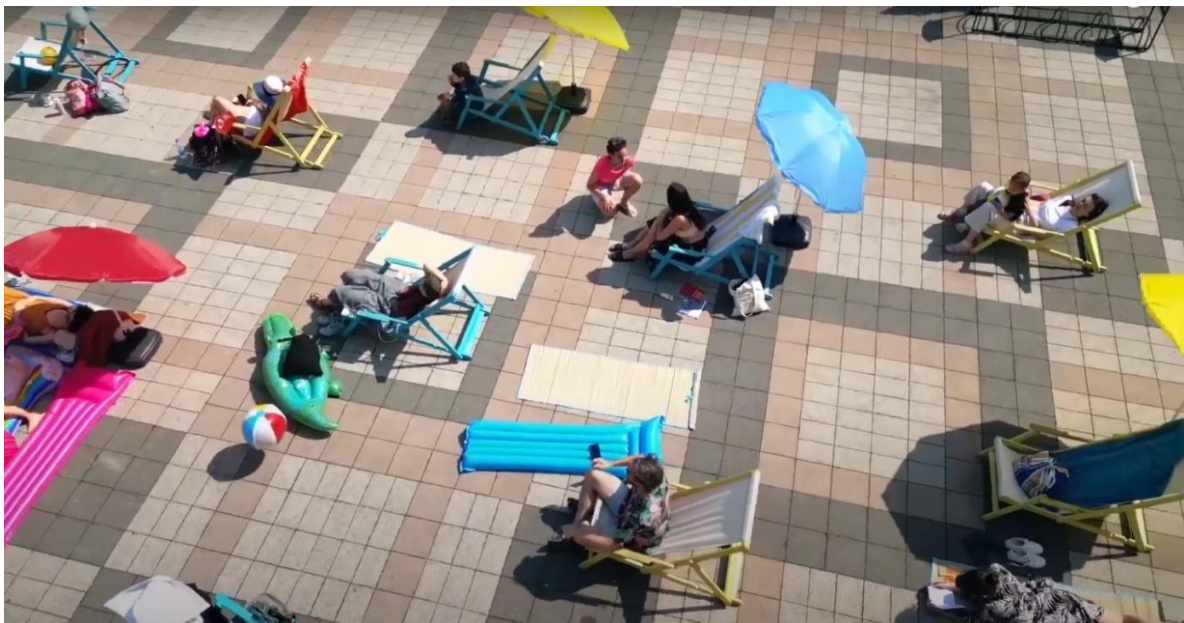
² This was done as part of the project SPA:RE—Public Spaces ReClaimed, led by INBOX Art Association from Novi Sad (Serbia), in collaboration with partners: University American College, School of Architecture and Design from Skopje (North Macedonia), Harabel Contemporary Art Center from Tirana (Albania) and Rimini Protokoll from Berlin (Germany).

³ Novi Sad (Serbia), Tirana (Albania) and Skopje (North Macedonia)

The project explored the potential of socially engaged art as a means to disrupt this condition, even if only temporarily. The rotating action was realised within a multimedia immersive performance—an audio-guided collective walk featuring narratives, soundscapes, and video interventions. An open call invited the general public and passersby to join the artistic team in occupying Katolička porta and enacting the beachgoer activities (Figure 1). Over the course of four hours of filming, a spontaneous, loosely choreographed action unfolded in this public space.

Figure 1

Beachgoers occupying the square Katolička porta in Novi Sad – a still frame from the video intervention within the performance Novi Sad, the Illusive Haven, directed by Attila Antal, cinematography by Igor Đokić and Miljan Vuletić, Novi Sad, 2023.



What Does Space Do?

The analysis specifically focuses on urban space and its performative role within the act of occupation. Drawing a direct analogy with J. L. Austin's theory of *Speech Acts* (Austin, 1975) and his question *How to Do Things with Words*, it examines what space actually does as an active and productive entity within the performance. One approach to this question relies on the inherent textuality of spaces and the notion of performing arts, theoretically centering on the problem of *production and realisation of meanings* (Vujanović, 2004). Rather than merely reflecting pre-established narratives, performative spaces engage in an ephemeral, unstable and dynamic flow of meanings, unfolding in the moment and in direct correlation with the surrounding texts.

This semantic instability, as exemplified by the urban-topographic rotation enacted in Novi Sad, arises from the intertextual dialogue between the space enveloping the action and the bodies occupying the square. The resulting meanings emerge through the event unfolding in this specific location, or more precisely, in the creative and productive dialogue *with it*. This relationship generates a specific role of space: it *co-performs*.

Co-performative Spaces and the Subversive Rupture of the Everyday

The co-performative function of Katolička porta unfolds through a dialogue between the body(ies) and the space. This quality marks a liminal state of *correlation*, developing a balanced, twofold interaction where both influence each other in the process of producing meanings and experiences within the performance. The bodies mark the space as a beach, while the space makes their actions unexpected and abrupt. The occupation act thus appears as a performative rupture of the everyday on two levels: as a repeatable video intervention experienced in the walking performance,⁴ juxtaposing the everyday of the square with its surreal alternative, and as a temporary live act during the filming process itself, disrupting the increasingly commercialised reality of the square.

This urban-topographic rotation explores how socially engaged art can be employed as a tool to temporarily disrupt the dominance of neoliberal capitalism in public spaces, fostering a reimagining of their social functions.

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⁴ Observed through a smartphone, on the location where the video was filmed.