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PERFORMING ARTS—INFLUENCING CHANGE

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Abstract: In the present political and socio-cultural situation in Slovakia, it is natural and necessary even to ask "what position do the arts occupy in this country?" and "what role do they play within the complex global atmosphere?" Art and culture should mirror the nation. Are we aware of that? Do we realize that art has the ability and the power to move? Not many of us realize this. This is a consequence of the permanent scepticism, apathy and resentment caused by the fact that this voice has never been heard. And this is not just the case in Slovakia. Yet even today there are certain groups of artists who still believe in the arts and their power. I think that giving up on this faith is the easiest thing to do. The decision whether to fight, rebel or actively participate is extremely complex and in many cases doing so may even threaten the freedom of the person. In this article I address the issue of whether art has the power and ability to change things. I draw attention to those socially engaging activities that could be described as performance art, which occur beyond enclosed areas and in public spaces; and in order to achieve change, they openly and nakedly attack individual consciousness and the subconscious.
Keywords: society; performance art; public space; engagement; artistic freedom; criticism

"Theatre is a place where you think; where you can question things and shake norms and stereotypes. It's a total experiment; there are no limits."
– Rabih Mroué, Lebanese performer, director, actor and playwright said in the interview for *Schau ins Blau*. (Wirth, Schamburek 2011).

Introduction

An almost empty stage: Just a table and a chair with a screen next to it. A man is sitting on the chair and a woman is standing at the table, with a book. She opens the book randomly and tells the man the page number. According to the page number, the man tells her how much time she has to describe what she sees in the book. Before she begins her description, the woman mentions the name of the artist who created the artwork in the book. Gradually, the audience realizes that this is a publication focusing specifically on body art. This is revealed through her reciting the names of Chris Burden, Gina Pane, Marina Abramović, Frank B., Herman Nitsch, Javier Perez and many others who use the body as an art object. The play, *Who's Afraid of Representation*, is based on this reoccurring principle: the number

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of the page in the book sets the time in minutes and seconds in which the particular artistic object is to be described. This process of reproduction is somewhat distorted by the man, who walks from the chair to the screen, stands in front of it and begins to tell his story—the story of Hassan Mamoun, a murderer who kills first of all for politics, and then later because of religious antagonism, and who is eventually confronted with the fact that if someone kills a person, this action cannot be justified either politically or religiously. Such a deed can only be committed by a mentally disturbed man.

In *Who's Afraid of Representation*, which was created in 2004 (it is still performed today—recently by Hebbel theatre am Ufer/HAU in Berlin), the story of murder, killing and death, combined with body art and self-destructiveness, violence, physical suffering, creates at first glance the impression of a parallel between reality and art. But this is not what the director wanted to achieve. Rabih Mroué, who is fascinated by body art himself, uses the story as an appeal to Lebanese society, which refuses to take responsibility for people such as Hassan Mamoun, and which rejects individualism and individual responsibility.

> This is my personal body against the body of the community. Thus, the community will antagonize the individual body. This is why Body Art doesn't exist in Lebanon till now.... I would like to see this kind of art in Lebanon because it might be able to produce a social shock. We still don't have it though. My idea was therefore to deal with it in a different way, to reproduce these works by words (Wirth, Schamburek 2011).

Several of Rabih Mroué's productions attempt to draw attention to the political situation in Lebanon, to its history associated with the civil war and the lack of freedom, which is a result not only of power politics, but also religious practices, and the constant pressure of society on the individual. He creates an engaged theatre, which is at the same time an artistic theatre. The social and society appeal of *Who's Afraid of Representation* does not come at the expense of artistic value.

If we are to talk about one of the forms of art—about how it engages and involves civil society, then I agree with Rabih Mroué that art is not politics, nor a revolutionary tribunal. Art can have a powerful impact and change the thing that is at the centre of its attention. The only condition is that the people themselves, as individuals, have a sensitivity, perceptiveness and willingness to change the thing that creates discomfort.

In the present political and socio-cultural situation in Slovakia, it is natural and even necessary to ask "what place do the arts occupy in this country?" and "what role do they play within the complex global atmosphere?" Art and culture should mirror the nation. Are we aware of that? Do we realize that art has the ability and power to move? Not many of us realize this. This is a consequence of the permanent scepticism, apathy and resentment caused by the fact that this voice has never been heard. And this is not just the case in Slovakia. Yet even today there are certain groups of artists who still believe in the arts and their power. I think that giving up on this faith is the easiest thing to do. The decision whether to fight, rebel and actively participate is extremely complex and in many cases it may even threaten the freedom of the person.

In this article I would like to address the issue of whether art has the power and ability to change things. There are many artists and artistic groups that have not remained indifferent and who engaged in socio-political criticism. I would, however, like to draw attention to

those socially engaging activities that could be described as performance art, which occur beyond enclosed areas and in public spaces, yet in order to achieve change, they openly and nakedly attack individual consciousness and subconscious. Even though these attempts are very rare in Slovak art nowadays, no matter how necessary they might be, I will try to give examples of certain artistic activities which bring us hope that it pays to engage socially and politically, to reflect and to create an image of the reality we live in.

Ever since the antiquities, art has functioned as a kind of mirror to society, and as a platform on which to express opinions, whether openly or in a somewhat hidden form. One can find historic evidence in many totalitarian regimes, where openness in art is still severely punished, and where artists therefore use metaphors, acronyms and ambiguity.

Performer's body as a medium

Throughout history, various artistic movements have been created in response to problems, drawing attention to them, and, depending on the political and social situation, provoking questions, stirring thoughts and fighting for change.

In 20th century art, this issue was at focal point for the performer and sculptor Joseph Beuys. His work has included social, political, cultural aspects. Beuys believed in the power of art and human creativity, which have the potential to bring about political change. His thoughts and perceptions on art can be characterized by his notion that "Everyone is an artist". In one of his most famous performances—*I like America and America likes me*—he allowed himself to be locked up in a room with a coyote for three days. He was first of all wrapped up in felt at the airport and then shipped directly to the gallery. Beuys did not in fact touch American soil, even when he was in New York. He was brought 50 copies of the *Wall Street Journal* every day and the coyote then urinated on them. The artist sometimes looked intensely into the coyote's eyes, while at other times he crept up from behind as if he were a thief. Over the three days, the coyote's behaviour changed—from apathetic to aggressive and, finally, friendly. After the event, the artist was again wrapped in felt and returned to the airport. For native Americans a coyote symbolizes something as powerful as a deity which has the ability to move between the physical and spiritual world. But for the settlers from Europe, coyotes were to be eradicated. In rebuilding the relationship with this animal, the artist hoped to remove the complexes and traumas of the American people. This act was also a manifestation of rejection and opposition to U.S. intervention in Vietnam, and challenged the hegemony of American art (Schneede 1998).

In the 1970s it was body art, whose radical form addressed issues of social crisis, political or religious conflicts. At the end of the 1970s, the anarchist punk movement was the most radical in not accepting social relations. With the increasing onset of the global crisis in the 1990s, there were already signs of artists that did not belong to any groupings working independently. Marina Abramović, whose work dates back to the early 1970s, is one of the most well-known representatives of body art; she continues to work today. In 1997 she created *Balkan Baroque* to draw attention to the ethnic cleansing that was occurring in the Balkans, and to the death, cruelty, and ugliness of war. Wearing a large white tunic she sat on a chair, surrounded by a pile of bloody ox bones which she scrubbed and washed for 24

hours for six full days. She used live performance to talk about the lies and history. At the same time she tried to provoke an intense individual response.

Chinese dissent

Radical and open art performances began occurring in the late 1980s. To a certain extent this was caused by the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. In the new democratic countries, there was an increase in public awareness associated with freedom of expression. Changes in the communist system also affected East Asia and the area that remained communist—especially China. During the 1990s, radical events were held mostly in small one-room apartments, where only invited friends would be present. One of these art revolutionaries happened to be the now internationally famous artist Ai Wei Wei. At that time, however, the attention of the western world focused more on the performance of Zhang Huan, who sat on a latrine naked covered in fish oil and honey to attract thousands of flies. His *Performance 12 Square Meters Work (1994)* pointed out the cruel reality of everyday life. 12 Square Meters is the size of the public toilet he sat in. Huan focused on the squalid condition of the toilet and the army of flies, which gave him the inspiration. On the one hand, by subjecting himself to the unbearably filthy public toilet for an hour, Zhang identified with the place and embraced it. On the other hand, he clearly suffered throughout the whole ordeal, while struggling to keep his composure in the inhuman environment. He says that this project allowed him "to experience his essential existence", reduced to the level of waste. His own existence has links to the general "relationship between people and their environment" in contemporary China, where numerous public toilets in similar conditions continue to exist in large and small cities and towns, hidden in dark alleys in the most densely populated areas and in the shadow of luxurious skyscrapers. It is in this sense that Zhang Huan's *12 Square Meters* combines personal experience with social critique—two essential elements of his performance art (Zhang Huan 1994).

In 2000 the same artist, dressed only in scanty clothing, swam in a plastic balloon in the river Huangpu, symbolizing the delicacy and fragility of human life on the river, an uncontrollable force. Similar works by Chinese artists portrayed anxiousness and issues relating to their society that directly affected the artwork—censorship, harassment, and in some cases even imprisonment.

In the early twenty-first century, when hardline communist Chinese society was transformed into an unusual form of government-controlled capitalism, performance artists turned their attention to the growing social divisions in the country. Despite the fact that Chinese art continued to be strictly controlled, some artists managed to exhibit abroad, often at personal risk. The most striking example is that of the artist Ai Wei Wei, a political activist and artist. From 1981 to 1993, he lived in the United States, mostly in New York, which gave him a foothold not only in America but also in Western Europe. "The more he is harassed by his government, the more Ai Wei Wei becomes a symbol of activism in China," proclaimed *The Guardian* in the U.K. and added: "The activism is the inevitable result of his art, rather than a distraction from it" (Branigan 2011). His installation *Sunflower Seeds*, exhibited in London in 2010, symbolized the relationship between the individual and the masses. What does it mean to be an individual in the world today, what position does he or she hold in

society? The fact that this was not just an artistic protest or a shout in the dark was testified paradoxically by the fact that he did not come to open the exhibition in the Tate Gallery in London as he was being retained in custody, accused of tax evasion. His exhibition and the story led to many civic activities devoted to human rights issues. Following his arrest and subsequent custody, he now lives under "house arrest", banned from travelling and from having any communication with the public. Since Ai Wei Wei has been critical of the human rights situation in China, he integrates this attitude into his artwork, thereby affecting society. His exhibitions have spurred many civic human rights activities. Ai Wei Wei is calling for change, despite the consequences directly affecting him.

Repression under communist regimes and various forms of dictatorship around the world has always prompted groups of radical artists to express themselves in radical forms. By performing artistic acts and using certain aesthetic attributes, such groups hold a direct artistic dialogue with members of the audience and their inner senses, appealing to them, and challenging them to become involved in civil society and change. "My voice is not for me. Every time I make a sentence I think how many people for how many generations had a voice that no one could hear. At most they will be remembered as numbers; in many cases, even numbers don't exist," (Branigan 2011)—says Ai Wei Wei.

Freedom versus lack of freedom

This does not mean that such voices do not resound in Central European countries and America, in countries with functioning democratic systems. People and artists are at least free to express their views and comments about what seems to be the problem in the country, either in the political, social or other spheres. For example in 2009, the Whitney Museum in New York displayed an exhibition entitled *Protect Protect* by Jenny Holzer, one of the most important contemporary artists. The exhibition contained a selection of Holzer's writings from between 1977 and 2001, as well as the declassified pages from U.S. government documents she has used as source material since 2004. The exhibition's subtitle *Protect Protect* was taken from texts detailing plans for the Iraq war, yet it also relates to the problematic power of personal desire.

> Whether she is using her own idiomatic texts, borrowing the words of international poets, or citing formerly classified materials containing policy debates, battle plans, and testimonies of American soldiers and detainees in U.S. custody, Holzer works between the public and private, the body politic and the body, the universal and the particular. Always timely, she provides a range of opinions, attitudes, and voices in works infused with formal beauty, sensitivity, and power (Smith 2009).

This is just one of many examples of contemporary activities in performance art that openly challenge the U.S. approach and attitude to the war in Iraq and in Afghanistan. Both Jenny Holzer and Ai Wei Wei are recognized authorities in the art world. The difference is that Jenny Holzer can display her courageous work in one of New York's most visited museums, while Ai Wei Wei may well be arrested at the opening of his exhibition.

Public space in Czech and Slovak contemporary art

Czech and Slovak artists are very familiar with such practices as interrogations, harassment, arrests, and restricted civil liberties. During the communist era, a number artists who were involved in art and those who simply expressed their opinions, or disagreed with the regime and its practices, were literally excluded from artistic activities, or ended up in prison for several years.

The present situation in democratized Slovakia and the Czech Republic has improved. But at the same time, society (especially Slovak society) has given up the struggle and lost the energy to tackle the issues and highlight problems through artistic forms. Even if the intention is expressed (mostly by Czech artists), it often remains unheard. The Czech public in general, not just artists, is much more aware of its democratic rights, as evidenced by a number of public protests, discussions and demonstrations. At the beginning of the twenty first century many artistic groups were formed in the Czech Republic, which were very active, engaged, open, and critical. Perhaps the best known group is *Ztohoven*, whose activities extend beyond the Czech border; American CNN and *The New York Times* have covered several of their projects. In June 2007 a group of, at the time anonymous artists, managed to hack into a programme on the Czech television channel CT2 inserting an illusion of a nuclear explosion in the Krkonoše mountains into panoramic shots of Czech ski resorts—this was seen by about 50 000 viewers. The *Ztohoven* group acknowledged that they were responsible for this act in the broadcast, and created a link to their own website using graphics in the style of the official television site. (The artists faced either six months to three years prison sentences, or a fine.) The group consists of about 12 artists, including Roman Tyc (*Roman Tyc* is the pseudonym used by the artist David Brudňák—none of the members have revealed their identity because they do not want to attract attention, especially from the media, as their actions are aimed against the media). Their aim is to reveal the power of the media and emphasize the need to distinguish between everyday reality and the reality presented by the media.

> On June 17th 2007, our group invaded the media and television, intruding upon it and casting doubt upon its accuracy and its credibility. We pointed out the possible confusion existing between the image of our world in the media and the real one. Is everything that can be found on a daily basis in our media, such as newspapers, the television, and the internet, the real truth and reality? This is idea that our project wants to introduce to the general public, a sort of reminder to everyone. We truly believe that the independent territory of television, governed by public law, is the kind of media that can handle such things even at the cost of self-incrimination. Let this be a kind of appeal for our future and a warning to any media that the truth must be presented at any cost. We are grateful for the independent media and the independent space for society (www.ztohoven.com).

Their other public act was *Romantycké semafory* (*Romantic traffic lights*)—where they replaced the traffic lights at the often busy intersections in the centre of Prague. Instead of the conventional red and green "men" at pedestrian crossings, they put other pictographs—men in unusual situations. Under the eye of police patrols they managed to put up pictures of figures urinating, drinking from bottles, lying, leaning, sitting with a dog, holding a gun to the head, hanged, with crutches, a woman with a child. *Ztohoven* broke and shattered

the public space that is bound to conventions; they dragged people from their automatic, accustomed or well-established perceptions of reality and the banality of everyday life.

The projects undertaken by this group all relate to the others, they build on the previous ones, on the issues raised in previous work. Despite the fact that they claim that their projects reflect what they see in their surroundings, the things that make them angry and upset, and that this is largely a local matter, this is not the case. The proof is the international interest that has been triggered in various articles and awards. Through street art, with wit and humour, they have uncovered negative aspects of the media today, of the artificial, inhuman time which parades itself as being democratic, but is in fact non-free and closed, determined by rules and stereotypes that do not inspire originality within the group. "We believe the message of the project itself is the most crucial part of it and we prefer this to relating our work to someone or something famous" (www.protisedi.cz).

Ztohoven uses freedom to show people that all the things that happen around them depend on them alone. The worst thing is the apathy that surrounds us. *Ztohoven* disrupts the conventional boundary between the recipient and the creator; they do not just display in art galleries. The real life found in their projects is real life, as is the interaction with people walking in the streets every day, travelling on the subways, or anywhere in public space.

Guma guar is a visual art and music group that has been around since 2003. Through its provocative creations, it forces people to think frequently about taboo topics, not only locally in the Czech Republic. They responded several times to the war in Iraq, and criticized the hegemony of the United States. Their 2006 installation, part of the project Bad News in Poland, provoked controversial reactions. *Guma guar* exhibited a photograph of Pope Benedict XVI holding Elton John's head in his hand. The photo was accompanied by the inscription: "All You Push Around." Thus, the authors responded directly to the discrimination against homosexuals in Poland, one of the most repressive Catholic countries in this regard. The poster was immediately removed after the opening by the gallery director. Milan Mikuláštík, member of the group commented:

> Our collage is Polish reality brought to absurdity. We addressed a specific problem in Polish society, which is discrimination against homosexuals, and we stumbled into another local problem – the lack of freedom of artistic expression and censorship. ... There is a paranoid climate in Poland (Kobza 2006).

At that time, under Polish law, artists could be condemned to two years imprisonment for offending a person's religious feelings. In another act, *The Beauty Free Shop*, they put on display cans filled with human flesh from the Iraqi city of Fallujah, where the U.S. Army had committed atrocities.

> Maybe we want to inspire some people to start doing something and not just look after their own well-being, which is going to disappear anyway in the current situation. In the Czech Republic, civil society is still in its infancy, yet it is crucial that it becomes involved in the creation of all policies, not just once every four years at the polls (Kobza 2006).

Pode Bal is a group that occupies a specific position in Czech performance art: In the *East Art Map* encyclopaedia, it was ranked as one of the most important artist communities

in Central and Eastern Europe since the Second World War. In 2000, their project *Malik urvi* attracted public attention, when they exhibited 36 portraits of leading politicians and socially active people in important positions who had been discredited for collaborating with the secret service STB, the Communist Party or the KGB. *Malik urvi* achieved success through its depictions of political and social aspects of the Velvet Revolution. Last year (2010), *Pode Bal* launched a second cycle of the project, *Malik urvi II*, showing 31 portraits of judges and prosecutors who had been involved in the political trials of the former regime. Once again these are people who are still actively professionally employed, this time in the judiciary system.

> The exhibition is not about the past. By considering the political trials of the past, the project shows how the current system has been set up. Communist judges and prosecutors who presided over the political trials of the totalitarian system are not supposed to work in the judiciary. Their behavior, which is documented, demonstrates how they can be used to serve political demands. A system which is established in such a way that it involves those that were in positions of power in a totalitarian system of violence enables the return of such violence. (http://www.dox.cz/cs/exhibition24/about)

Such events are rare in Slovakia, and if they happen, artists initiate them on their own, or in random groups. At present (November 2011) for example, there is an exhibition entitled Re-Public Space, devoted to contemporary political art in public spaces in Košice, and organized as part of the Košice festival Refresh +89. *Guma guar* is involved in this exhibition, alongside Slovak artists such as Andrea Kalinová, Peter Kalmus, Jana Kapelová, Kassaboys, Svätopluk Mikyta, and Michal Moravčík. It is an artistic response to the Velvet Revolution in 1989 and to its unfulfilled ideals. Their work aims to provide a platform for questions and discussions on the state of society 22 years after the revolution. With this in mind, *Guma guar* created a festival billboard "Twenty-two Years Later", featuring Lech Walesa as one of the principal European personalities of the collapse of the communist era. The billboard uses Wałęsa's quote evaluating the contemporary world: "There is time for XXI century communism" (Guma guar 2006).

Lech Walesa, the anti-communist dissident, a representative of the Free Solidarity movement and Nobel Peace Prize winner, shared his idea of communism in the 21st century, which he sees as the only solution to the political and social instability in North Africa. He believes that the communist system would produce order, peace and development. *Guma guar* reacted to this paradox writing ironically on the billboard: "In the 21 century, the impossible becomes possible". Wałęsa's words challenge everything he fought for and what he has believed in during his life. *Guma guar* questions our values, the world we live in and our faith.

Sculptor Michael Moravčík, one of the participants of the Košice festival is a Slovak civic and artistic activist. His work responds critically to events occurring in Slovakia and Europe. Moravčík deals with the themes of urbanism, memory and nationalism. Many of his works, for example his furniture installations, are influenced by the author's past and the collective past. An exhibition called DKP (small tangible assets) deals with criticisms of our changing history. In DKP he examines the artistic institutions (the Academy of Arts and galleries) which are supposed to provide the next generation of artists and the general public

with enduring aesthetic experiences, but their ability to do so also depends on the political situation in the country. Another piece is displayed near the toilets—a glazed door leading into the toilet cubicle—referring to people's loss of privacy nowadays.

> I wanted to surprise visitors, to shock the audience by betraying what they are sure about. The system does this. Sometimes we find ourselves in a situation, where we are stripped bare and they know everything about us (Kopernická 2004).

Designer Michal Moravčík is the author of numerous manifestos that challenge and attack aesthetic and cultural life in Bratislava—the capital of Slovakia. He continues to deal with issues of power, manipulation and nationalism.

Jana Kapelová is an outstanding artist who has been involved in public space art projects. She has collaborated with Moravčík on several occasions. In 2010, to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, she organized a discussion with the Ministry of Culture about the *Slovak National Gallery.* She later protested against the Svätopluk statue at the Bratislava Castle and she appealed for support from Vladimír Beskid, Director of the *Jan Koniarek Gallery* in Trnava.

> The statement that twenty years have not passed remains valid. Totalitarian practices persist, including at the regional level. After the decentralization reforms, the state transferred galleries to the local governments, so there is little chance of making an impact. Municipalities step in, to little effect, and interfere with the plans for exhibitions. They insist on mainstream art, special exhibitions of their friends' work, and thus drastically diminish the standing of those galleries.

Jana Kapelová considers that the only response to such a situation is through art, as professional voices are ignored. "When nobody listens to you, the only thing left open to you is to find another way of responding" (Opoldusová 2011). In 2006 her project *Ako to funguje* (*How it Works*) directly captured the situation at the Ministry of Culture. She went to the Office of the Minister, where she learnt from her dialogue with the Minister's secretary that she should wait until the Minister leaves. The next thing she does is dust his office. Kapelová points to the limitations of bureaucrats and the fact that artists and people in general are not welcome at the ministry. She shows how the ministry becomes confused when faced with individual's asserting their democratic rights within the official structures.

Jana Kapelová and Michal Moravčík are active visual artists. One can see that there is less will in Slovakia to speak openly and criticize—in recent years there have been no group activities along the lines of those by the Czech groups. The only efforts are those attempted by individual artists, which remain inside galleries, theatre and halls, or which are destined to be forgotten quickly. Artistic activities in public spaces, in real, everyday life remain below the radar.

Conclusion: The power of art and change in society

Since I am familiar with the world of theatre, I have to say that unfortunately the situation is similar here as well. Theatre remains enclosed within the space of the theatre, although

one can find theatre companies which do not circumvent social and political criticism. Theatre does not have the kind of impact that might equal that achieved by the groups mentioned earlier with their courageous public space performances. In the decade following the revolution in 1989, when actors were among the first to uphold public rights, only *Stoka* Theatre put on productions which criticized the socio-political situation. Their successors in *SkRAT* Theatre (former *Stoka* Theatre actors) use a similar method, and some of their projects reflect the situation and times which we are experiencing. This is, however, not the kind of engagement and determination that calls for change. In the case of *SkRAT* Theatre, it can be seen more as a disillusioned and apathetic statement, paralyzing though some transition to change.

In Slovakia, there is currently no theatre personality like *Rabih Mroué*, with ambitions to be engaged, critical and political. This does not simply concern the ideas, but the formal aspect as well. If we want art to change the things which create dissatisfaction in our society, then it should raise awareness, as it was aptly defined by *Guma guar*— "Art has the ability to stimulate people into thinking, and can encourage them to think deeper, to perceive reality and look at it with constructive criticism" (http://gumaguar.bloguje.cz). This is exactly how I see the power of art and its impact on change—prompting questions through artistic provocation, encouraging healthy criticism by pointing out how and where we live. If a spectator or any person realizes that, then he will perceive, listen and search. Art and artists will then be able to become the instruments of change.

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