

In the Open – Negotiating Public Space

I: Spaces|Boundaries

Public spaces, analogue and digital, surround us each and every day; they shape our daily lives and influence our activities and decisions. They embody the social and political conditions of our societies and reflect the degree of democratic participation, but also of state authority, political censorship, and discrimination. In turn, each individual also influences public spaces, making them the subject of constant transformation.

Especially in recent years, social space in Europe and beyond has been undergoing rapid changes. *In the Open – Negotiating Public Space* attempts to situate these developments in a temporal and socio-political framework, while identifying possible forms of agency within this context, both through the works in the exhibition space and an accompanying participatory public programme. Together with Ruth Beale, Deniz Beşer, Gala Alica Ostan Ožbolt, Anna Gaberscik, and the collective OUTsite, we ask: What impact does the decline of shared social space have on our community life and social development? How can we reclaim parts of public space and have more influence on its design and organisation? How can we achieve a fair distribution of social participation among the population? And what means are necessary to this end?

II: (En)closed

Processes of “public enclosure” – the decline of public space, infrastructures, and shared resources – are on the rise, driven especially by the neoliberal agendas of our late capitalist era: commercialisation, privatisation, and expropriation as well as the erosion of public control over physical and digital commons¹ are now prevalent methods to maximise private market profit² while at the same time preserving entrenched social hierarchies.

Ruth Beale's audio and -film installation *Commons, drones, gifs* (2017) shows drone-filmed images of the English commons – lands that were once collectively administered by the people and now largely in private hands. Beale's work illustrates that drone footage from our common airspace blurs the boundaries between commons and private estates and as such highlights the dichotomies between public and private property, collectivity and individualism.

The intensification of these processes becomes tangible, for example, through the decimation and elimination of infrastructures and assets such as park benches, public toilets, libraries, and other communal spaces. This restructuring entails the privatisation of

¹ Cf. David Bollier, “The Commons, Short and Sweet,” *Bollier.org* (July 2011), <http://www.bollier.org/commons-short-and-sweet>.

² Cf. Max Haiven, *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2014).

problems: conditions previously considered a public concern undergo a domestication and are relegated to the private sphere. As a consequence, the mechanisms of public enclosure become an instrument that neoliberal governments use to evade their responsibility of care.³

Gala Alica Ostan Ožbolt's *No Loitering* (2020) visualises the deficits that emerge: her sculptures occupy negative space, use gaps, fences, and posts to produce what is not (or no longer) there. In her endeavours to open up public space, Ostan Ožbolt creates beds for the homeless and seating for walkers. In doing so, the artist foregrounds the deliberate unusability of public spaces and exposes the hostility of contemporary architecture. *No Loitering* exemplifies the direct impact of socio-spatial and institutional restrictions on social life. Ultimately, they directly contribute to social inequality and the exclusion of marginalised groups and actively impede the public realm.⁴

III: Claim_Reclaim_Co-create

To combat this social exclusion, it is not only essential to improve public spaces and infrastructures but, above all, to create equal access for different groups in society: people with mental and physical disabilities, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, those with migration backgrounds, and People of Colour are still profoundly affected by exclusion from public space.

Anti-racism educator, author, artist and director Anna Gaberscik draws attention to these shortcomings with her event *EDELVIBES 2.0*. As part of an evening programme, bloopers and selected deleted scenes from *EDELWEISS*, Gaberscik's performative documentary film about the reality of People of Colour in Austria, will be screened before inviting people to dance and socialise.

Gaberscik seeks to create a space People of Colour can navigate relaxed and carefree, while pointing out that this is still not (always) possible in public life. In the film *EDELWEISS*, dance and performance play a prominent, activist role, even serve as a place-making strategy: as such, *EDELVIBES 2.0* is equally a deliberate occupation and demand for more space.

The public programme of *In the Open* also highlights the importance of places where different social groups and cultures overlap, and help counteract socio-cultural segregation in the city. *In Zines We Trust – (Re)claiming Space!*, a zine workshop by artist, curator, and independent editor Deniz Beşer, epitomises this aspect by creating such an interface through bilingualism. Against the backdrop of the debate around the participatory rights of different groups in society, especially those of the Turkish diaspora as one of the largest

³ Cf. Andreas Chatzidakis et al., *The Care Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2020).

⁴ Cf. Heinz Bude et al., *Öffentlicher Raum!: Politik der gesellschaftlichen Teilhabe und Zusammenkunft* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2020).

immigration groups in Austria, Beşer strives to use creative work to engender interculturality in public space.

Who decides how and when public space is used and by whom? Charlotte Fleischmann and Laura Lohmann from the collective OUTsite address issues of space management and design. Their project *Urbodrom* playfully encourages people's political engagement and participation in shaping public space. It is centred around social and ecological sustainability as well as co-creation and co-ownership. Following a guided game session, visitors can develop their own collective strategies derived from the new perspectives and encounters while playing *Urbodrom* in the exhibition space.

IV: React/ivate

Public spaces have the potential to facilitate democratic expression, to support social interaction, and to truly be "open" – to all parts of society without exception. On the one hand, it is the responsibility of the state and municipalities to protect public space from further privatisation and to ensure more inclusive accessibility; on the other hand, it is also the responsibility of us citizens to protect, question, and expand the qualities of social space. This also implies recognising one's own privileges and other life realities that differ from them, making and taking space, and becoming active. *In the Open* strives to address these major tasks by providing contexts, introducing and comparing existing methods, and exploring new forms of participation.

Artists

Ruth Beale

Ruth Beale is a London-based artist whose work troubles the structures and systems that shape society, from institutions to social ties to the public realm. Employing popular and everyday forms of material culture, Ruth's work reveals complexities of knowledge production and political impact. Embracing dialogue and exchange, Ruth is committed to the radical possibilities of collective and collaborative work.

Deniz Beşer

Deniz Beşer is an artist, curator, and independent publisher living in Vienna and Istanbul. He received his BA in ceramic and glass design from Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University and studied painting at the University of Seville. He is the director of Open Studio Days İstanbul, Fanzineist Vienna Art Book & Zine Fair, and FanzineIST – Zine Fest of İstanbul. Beşer is also co-founder of the publication and art collective Heyt be! Fanzine.

Anna Gaberscik

Anna Gaberscik (US/AT) is an anti racism consultant and activist, performer, author, and director. Her work focuses on anti-racism and questioning patriarchal, heteronormative, and white narratives and discourses. Anna is the founder of *Through Our Eyes*, an interdisciplinary project that explores anti-racism, intersectionality, and empowerment in various creative forms.

Gala Alica Ostan Ožbolt

In her practice, Gala Alica Ostan Ožbolt is engaged with urban space and current socio-political issues. The problems of public space, be it privatisation, gentrification, hostile architecture, or the line between private and public life, are the departure points for her site-specific interventions. She studies fine arts at the University of Applied Arts Vienna and holds a BA in sculpture from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Ljubljana.

OUTsite

Charlotte Fleischmann is a geographer, completed an MA in International Development and now studies Spatial Planning at TU Vienna. Laura Lohmann received her MA in Environmental Ethics and now works as a streetworker for Juvivo. This is where Charlotte and Laura met and collaborated on various projects. They share a passion for social and ecological sustainability and spatial planning strategies that meet all needs. With their game *Urbodrom*, they invite others to participate in their vision for more social participation and activism in the city.

Curator

Fiona Irene Graf

Fiona Irene Graf is a curator and cultural worker. Her practice focuses on participatory and collaborative modes of working, alternative economic systems, and the complex entanglements between human and nature. Graf holds an MFA in Curating from Goldsmiths, University of London, and has co-curated a variety of projects including LVAN: Relay!, a series of walking tours in collaboration with Lewisham Visual Art Network, part of Lewisham Borough of Culture (2022), and Regroundings, a film programme and online artist conversation, Goldsmiths CCA (2021). As a member of the curatorial collective and research group Mapping Local Ecologies, she co-organised a programme of public events whilst in residency at Goldsmiths CCA (2021-22). As Curatorial Engagement Fellow at Spike Island in Bristol (2022 - 2023), Graf curated 'Exercises in Exchange', a year-long public programme concerned with notions of reciprocity and exchange.