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Street Art and the Crisis of Public Space During the Pandemic¹

Abstract

This paper analyzes the negative impacts of the pandemic and related restrictions on public spaces, and the role of street art as one of the tools to counteract them. I claim that the current crises, epidemiological and socioeconomic, create another type of breakdown: the crisis of public space and the reaction to it. Street art is gaining significance as a voice of political dissent against the appropriation of public space.

Keywords

Street Art, Public Space, *List* [Letter], Subversiveness, Activism

Introduction

Along with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, post-apocalyptic photographs of deserted metropolises started to circulate online. The abandoned streets strongly appealed to one's imagination, which set off many pandemic-related social anxieties. They looked like the setting of a nightmare. In fact, at the end of March 2020, I experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as such a nightmare, and as Slavoj Žižek notes in *The Appointment in Samara* (2020a), I was not the only one. It was scary, it made me sleepless, but I thought it was soon going to dissolve into thin air (which was un-

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doubtedly wishful thinking. Still, such thinking was reinforced by the history of the SARS-CoV-1virus and its disappearance). At the time of writing and nearly one year later, my home country, Poland, was facing the third wave of COVID-19. Every day thousands of people were getting infected, and hundreds were dying. The nightmare became a reality, and it started to shape our personal and public lives.

This paper was written during the seemingly never-ending pandemic, in spite of any hope provided by vaccines. As such, the paper indeed overlooks some essential aspects of street art during the crisis, which would be evident from a distanced perspective. Nevertheless, I believe that there is value in analyses written as an immediate response since they allow us to observe surrounding reality more carefully and ground our claims about what we have experienced. Thus, I have decided to focus primarily on what I see: pandemic-related problems in Poland, especially when analyzing an example of the practices of street art. I refer to authors who comment mostly on neoliberal societies of the Global North. However, even in the EU, it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is managed differently in various countries. The difference is not caused primarily by divergent scientific reports but by distinct political values in various societies. Therefore, the nature of the phenomena described in this paper has to be seen as local phenomena that reflect global tendencies; the same holds for the nature of street art.² I analyze the negative impacts of the pandemic, related restrictions on public spaces, and street art's role as one of the tools to counteract the negative impacts and restrictions. I claim that the current crises, epidemiological and socioeconomic, have created another type of breakdown: a crisis of public space. In reaction to that, street art is gaining significance as a voice of political dissent against the appropriation of public space.

The first section, "The New Normal," discusses the methods of dealing with the pandemic by neoliberal societies of the Global North. I focus explicitly on how the chosen model of crisis management threatens the interests of marginalized groups not only today but also in a future post-pandemic

² Recently, I have seen a photo of a girl pinned to the ground by the London police during protests over Sarah Everard's murder. What hit me was the visual resemblance between this photo and scenes from protests against the anti-abortion restrictions in Poland. This aesthetic intuition shows how pandemic-related restrictions are used in different countries to justify violence against those who are fighting for their rights. However, as mentioned above, this parallel would have to be more nuanced and seen in a localized context. See: [online] <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/mar/14/woman-pinned-ground-clapham-vigil-policing-disgraceful-sarah-everard> [accessed: 04.04.2021].

reality. By drawing on the works of Grace Blakeley and Žižek, I try to show that more democratic solutions for the COVID-19 pandemic are possible. The second section, “Public Space,” analyzes how the underprivileged can use public space to fight for their interests. I also discuss, referencing Margaret Kohn, how Capital devours public space. Both these features of public space—its democratic potential and its disappearance—are crucial in the context of the mechanisms presented in the first section, while the use of public space could play an essential role in creating a fairer “new normal.” The following section, “Street Art,” is devoted to street art theories, mostly Andrea Baldini’s concept of street art that underlines street art’s subversive potential. In the section “Street Art during the Pandemic,” I claim that the subversive potential of street art can be used as a tool in the political struggle for justice that takes place in public space, which is even more endangered during the pandemic. In light of the current restrictions on gatherings, street art can be considered their equivalent, reminding us that there are still voices that need to be heard and that not everyone accepts the leading neoliberal narrative. In the last section, “List [Letter],” I present a work of pandemic street art performed in May 2020 in Warsaw, highlighting how street art can practically function as an ally to pro-democratic and pro-worker movements.

“The New Normal”

One of the major themes of many conversations, especially in the early days of the pandemic, was about the first thing we would do when we return to business as usual or when everything “goes back to normal.” This question resulted from believing that we could go back to an unchanged, pre-pandemic reality (conceivably with an increased appreciation for everything previously taken for granted). However, as Žižek (2020a, 9) notes, what is waiting for us after dealing with the pandemic is a “new normal”: “Our first reaction to the virus was to regard it as just a nightmare from which we would soon awaken. Now we know this will not happen, we will have to learn to live in a viral world, a new way of living will have to be painfully reconstructed.” The look of this painfully recreated “new normal” depends not only on constantly changing reports from virologists but also on reactions to the increasingly visible breakdown of the current socioeconomic system.

The appearance of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the COVID-19 disease, is a biological fact. However, it is impossible to understand the dynamics of the pandemic’s development by considering it in isolation from how capital-

ism works. Andrew Liu (2020, 33) writes in *“Chinese Virus,” World Market*: “In recounting the story of the novel coronavirus, it becomes increasingly clear that its movements have thus far mimicked the pathways of the 21st-century global market.” The current speed of spreading the illness would have been impossible without the mass movement of people and goods. Governments have introduced restrictions in such a way as to minimize their impact on the economy, which comes down to counting how many more lives can be sacrificed for the rich to get richer. As a result of growing unemployment, monopolists can afford to ignore even the basic restrictions created by governments.³ Contrary to early assurances that “we are all in this together” and that the coronavirus is in itself “democratic,” it turns out that the marginalized bear the burden of the pandemic’s costs.⁴

The pandemic painfully exposes the rules of the capitalist system. As Blakeley (2020) notes in *The Corona Crash*, the pandemic does not change the logic of capitalism but rather intensifies specific worrying mechanisms previously seen in public life. According to her, the narrative of modern capitalism and its practice has been significantly disconnected, at least since the 2008 crisis, and the current crisis has only confirmed this: “Free market, competitive capitalism—if it ever actually existed—is dead” (Blakeley, 2020, 106). Competitive capitalism has been replaced by a planned economy of corporate welfare in which public subsidies support supranational institutions, market whales and wolves, granted not even to all businesses but the largest among them. Such “socialism for the rich, capitalism for the poor,” together with the already existing monopolization of the biggest markets, results in even greater wealth inequality between the 1%, a small group of capitalists, and the rest, a subordinate majority, all while developing crises are increasingly affecting broader social groups. The political class has taken action in support of this mechanism. Such action leads to the subordination of democratic values to the power of Capital. Global corporations effectively bear no responsibility for the work conditions they offer or the ecological consequences of their actions and remain free from accountability.

Politicians worldwide voted for multimillion-dollar subsidies for businesses, while few countries have decided to condition them on regulatory policies, such as paying taxes in the country where they make profits, abid-

³ See: [online] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-amazon-france-idUSKCN2261YQ> [accessed: 20.12.2020].

⁴ See: [online] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/933225/S0824_SARS-CoV-2_Transmission_routes_and_environments.pdf [accessed: 20.12.2020].

ing by workers' rights, or introducing pro-environmental practices. However, as Blakeley notes, these current conditions create an opportunity to introduce democratic control over Capital by conditioning subsidies on the factors mentioned earlier. If we have already agreed, as a society, that we live by *default* in a planned economy, not a free market one, the only question that remains to be posed is who should benefit from this planning by default. As we have seen so far, if we consent to the capitalist lobby's influence on these actions, the post-pandemic reality, given the economic crisis and growing power of monopolists, will indeed turn out to be post-apocalyptic. Žižek (2020b, 108) puts it in a nutshell in *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*, paraphrasing Rosa Luxemburg: "Communism or barbarism, as simple as that!"

The processes that shape modern capitalism by monopolizing money and power and at the same time limiting workers' rights are reflected not only in working conditions but also in other aspects of public life. One of them is the restriction of public space, which is vanishing as a place of political struggle. In the next section, I will analyze this and discuss some of the social risks it brings.

Public Space

The concept of public space may seem intuitive; however, it is not as evident as it may seem. According to what Kohn writes in *Brave New Neighborhoods* (2004), the distinctive factor of public space is that one may conduct political dispute within it. It is a space where the representatives of various social groups can meet and express their political interests more or less spectacularly. Sometimes the conflicts between differing visions of society take the form of manifestation and counter-manifestation. However, just as often, the mere presence of the representatives of certain groups may be a source of discomfort for others (Kohn gives the example of the middle-class being reluctant to share space with people experiencing homelessness). This understanding of public space does not incorporate all the places traditionally described as such. For a dispute to be possible in a specific space, it cannot be private property (since the owner can dictate the rules of using a particular space), but it also must be available to everyone, not just *de iure*, but *de facto*, and it has to create conditions for incidental contact between strangers. Only under these conditions do conflicts of interest become visible in a particular space, making it public.

Public space and all aspects of public debate could be understood in the context of Jacques Rancière's (2013) "distribution of the sensible" presented in *The Politics of Aesthetics*. He notes that the dominant discourse is based on the exclusion of voices of those presented as incapable of speaking for themselves. As such, marginalized groups do not have their representation and lack the power to fight for their interests. Everything that they try to say is presented as insufficient for recognition by the rest of society. Different institutions act to erase subversive voices; one is the rational voice, which presents every affective struggle as pointless. In the end, only those who possess enough capital and clout (financial or social) are taken seriously. The demands of other groups, especially those endangering the interests of Capital, are silenced. They will remain silenced as long as the underprivileged do not unite and threaten the existing power relations. That is why public space plays such an essential role in social struggle. Public space is relatively less controlled than other social institutions, and also, those who have nothing except their bodies can use it to produce their counter-discourse.

An excellent example of this is the social movement Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet (The All-Poland Women's Strike). When thousands of people took to the streets in October 2020 (not once, not twice, but for a few months already, and this struggle continues) to protest a practically total abortion ban in Poland, they posed demands that no Polish politicians from almost any party could articulate. Mainstream media, not only on the pro-government side but also oppositional media, stuck to the conservative storytelling that the Polish political class has consolidated since the '90s. They could not, without hesitation, express the pro-choice demands formulated by Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet. Not to mention the protesters' motto, *wypierdalać* or "Get the fuck out," mirrored people's frustration following from the more severe restriction of what is already one of the strictest abortion laws in the EU. The street was one of the few places where peoples' demands could be expressed out loud.

Public space, understood this way becomes the place of forming communities unified by the struggle for their rights. It is also one of the few places where people from different social groups can meet each other, enabling unobvious alliances. Communities created in these conditions are not bound by hegemonic discourse—on the contrary, according to Chantal Mouffe's and Ernesto Laclau's book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), their democratic potential comes from revealing the existence of distinct interests. The mere presence of members of different social groups in a public space makes it one of the few places where the inevitability of social conflict is

exposed. Kohn (2004, 162) writes: "One purpose of public space is to overcome this stratification and provide an occasion for contact between people from different subcultures, residential enclaves, and social classes. As long as social space remains segregated, then it cannot foster a sense of solidarity." Democracy and solidarity can be advanced only when members of different social groups can meet and reveal antagonisms. Therefore, the existence of both is impossible without public space.

However, public space is systematically appropriated by Capital. As Kohn writes, one place after the other becomes "a grey area" where conflict and disputes are erased to ensure the feeling of familiarity and safety for the privileged users of these spaces, and above all, to not violate the status quo. Shopping centers are an example of such a space. They present themselves as modern marketplaces; however, unlike those, they are managed in such a way as to exclude certain types of activity (primarily broadly understood political activity, but also to minimize any non-consumptive activity) and people (primarily people experiencing homelessness). Baldini, in *Street Art, Decorum, and the Politics of Urban Aesthetics* (2020), analyzes another way of public space appropriation by showing how those in power use certain aesthetic concepts (like decorum) for the same purpose as analyzed by Kohn, that is to exclude types of people and activities. This process of aesthetic war creates a "Disneylanded" public space. It is "clean, safe, but fundamentally inauthentic" (Baldini, 2020). A community made in such conditions turns out to be a select group of consumers, united by lifestyle and privilege. Kohn (2004, 106) notes that contemporarily "private simulacra come to substitute for public space." Various projects, sending the message captured by the slogan "we are all in this together," built such a simulacrum of community during the pandemic. As part of one of these projects, hashtags such as #hope, #solidarity, #stayhome, or #AllOfUs were projected on Matterhorn mountain in the Alps. A seemingly inclusive message of transnational and transclass unity exposed its exclusive nature with a slogan that appeared on the mountain aimed at a select group of consumers and read: "Dream now—travel later."

Different strategies have been developed to resist the loss of public space (in Poland, especially in Warsaw, in the era of "wild re-privatization," such as grassroots cultural centers created in squats). In the next section, I discuss how street art can be understood as artistic expression and as a weapon in the struggle for public space. It is not essential to accept the etiology of public space and democracy crises that I have presented in the two previous sections above to agree with my argument about street art's role during the

pandemic, which I present in the following section. One can argue that street art plays a vital role in representing marginalized voices regardless of how the capitalist system works. However, my focus on the context of contemporary capitalism comes from the belief that the role of critical philosophy is to unveil mechanisms of power existing in our society, including erasing public space in favor of Capital's interests. The division between those who are heard and silenced is not accidental since different forms of discrimination are functional for dominant power relations. So, I have tried to capture the processes of marginalization to understand street art as a theater of this struggle.

Street Art

Street art has been extensively analyzed, and there are various theoretical approaches to defining what "street art" actually is. One of the most cited definitions was proposed by Nick Riggle in his article *Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces* (2010), where he connects the essence of this type of art to it being used to create the street. In other words, a work of street art is a work that loses some of its aesthetic or interpretive value when "taken out of" the urban space in which it was created. However, due to my claim that the pandemic affects mainly the political properties of street art, I would like to cite a theory proposed in *Street Art: A Reply to Riggle* (2016) by Baldini, who focuses primarily on the political context when defining street art.

According to Baldini, a feature of street art is the subversiveness of its form: "Street artworks, including those who are not politically conscious, are subversive in a different and more profound sense: they challenge norms and conventions regulating acceptable uses of public space." (2016, 188). By claiming the right to grassroots expression in a public space, street art questions power and Capital's monopoly to shape narrative. This change concerns how space looks (a street art intervention changes what the place looks like) and how it is used and perceived. A passive viewer, a consumer in constant transit, becomes an active creator who fights for the right to occupy and shape public space.

A recurring question in the context of defining street art is its legality. I agree with Baldini's and Pamela Petrucci's thesis *from Knitting a Community Back Together* (2017) that street art does not have to be illegal to be subversive.⁵ Questioning property rights is one of its subversive forms, but

⁵ Baldini elaborates on the complicated relationship between street art and law in his book *A Philosophy Guide to Street Art and the Law* (2018).

not the only one. Baldini and Perucci argue that without breaking the existing law, or rather by exploiting its loopholes, street art can question the hegemonic discourse in the spirit of Rancière's "distribution of the sensible." Art can be used to create counter-representations and restore the voices of the silenced. Street art, as a type of such practice, can introduce erased perspective into the public space. Sondra Bacharach in *Finding Your Voice in the Streets* (2018) recalls a project, *Stop Telling Women to Smile* by Tatyana Fazlalizadeh, to show how street art can be used to give justice to those who are experiencing epistemic injustice, and by doing so, change the dominant discourse. Tony Chackal refers to the same project in *Of Materiality and Meaning* (2016). He distinguishes between a work's illicitness, understood similarly to what I have reconstructed, and its illegality: "When works are illegal, this is at first a nonaesthetic feature of the form or production process. When they are illicit, this is an aesthetic feature of the work's content: what it expresses, depicts, represents, or means. But these divisions are blurry and involve overlap rather than being strictly demarcating" (2016, 368). Even if illegality is not essential for a piece of art to be classified as street art, it can still contribute to its materiality and meaning.

In *Street Art and Consent* (2015), Bacharach points to another feature of street art, which seems especially important to its subversiveness. In her view, street art changes the perception of public space not only on the part of its creators but also its audience: street art "challenge[s] (and change[s]) the viewer's experience of his/her environment" (2015, 481). I would add, citing Joe Austin's *More to see than a canvas in a white cube*, that street art provides "a way of seeing something new: an-other visual order is possible, and so an-other city is possible, and so an-other life is possible as well" (2010, 44). Even if street art interventions do not remain in place for very long (due to their temporary nature or exposure to damage), they permanently leave a trace in the community. By shaping a new understanding of public space by its members, or rather a new understanding of their role as potential creators of that space, they also shape the identity of a particular community. By showing that the hegemonic narrative of power is just a way of colonizing public space and not the only way of creating it, street art symbolically gives back agency to its users.

The political nature of street art and its objection to hegemonic storytelling results not only from the type of content expressed in these works. Similar to the case of marginalized groups, its mere presence in public space exposes the existence of conflict. Street art highlights alternative narratives and ways of using public space while being one of the ways of participating

in a political dispute. The communal aspect of street art can be understood in the context of alliances discussed by Kohn—alliances between people who were previously strangers, for whom public space creates a place to meet. The power of such a community comes not from accepting the same opinions but from a unified call for hearing voices excluded from the neoliberal debate.

As I have mentioned initially, nearly all aspects of our lives are now affected by the pandemic.⁶ This affect is no different with public space and street art. During the lockdown-related restrictions in public space, the importance of this kind of art as a means in social struggle has grown significantly. I argue in favor of this claim in the next section.

Street Art during the Pandemic

With the pandemic and introduction of lockdown measures in many countries, the vanishing of public spaces has intensified. The narrative of individual survival, a reflection of the earlier glorification of individual success in neoliberal narrative, has also been reflected in approaches to space. Communal space and community itself have been identified with the danger from which a private home protects. Like in the stories about closing town gates in fear of the coming plague, we have been convinced to barricade ourselves in private fortresses (which for some meant an escape to a private island, for others staying in their apartment, and for a significant number of people a choice between staying in a potentially epidemically dangerous hotel for people experiencing homelessness or a complete lack of shelter). In many places across the world, among them in Poland, politicians seem to agree that in the time of the pandemic, the function of public places should be reduced to transit and perhaps consumption (thus, ironically, they are to serve the same functions which are closely linked to spreading the virus).

Meanwhile, any other activity must be limited to activity in small groups, or even better, individual activity, in line with strict regulations. The police ensure compliance in many places, and therefore breaking pandemic restrictions becomes a severe felony against public order. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, there have been numerous physical interventions of the government into city space, such as closing playgrounds, parks or removing benches. With more knowledge gained about COVID-19, virolo-

⁶ It is still very important to emphasize, that they are often affected in very different ways: for some it is a lack of winter holidays in Switzerland, and for many children in Poland a lack of space to study during remote learning.

gists declared that contact in open spaces is relatively safe (Bulfone *et al.* 2020), and thus many countries have decided to open consumer spaces such as shopping centers. However, using public space remains under strict regulations. Two types of coercion, legal and physical, and the long-term nature of these solutions result in the fading of community created within a public space. Random interactions with strangers become impossible, and thus the dispute about the desired shape of society is silenced. Therefore, the COVID-19 crises are the epidemiological and economic crisis and the crisis of public space. I am not trying to question the seriousness of the threat the virus brings to human lives, far from it. Nor do I downplay the need for restrictions to limit the spread of the virus. However, as I have mentioned in the introduction, these restrictions are based not only on virologists' reports. An important factor at play (and one which causes the differences in measures taken in pandemically similar countries) are political values and governmental recognition of the interests of diverse groups in society. That is why induced restrictions concerning using public space must be discussed as remedies in the face of the pandemic and considered from a political perspective.

In light of the three crises mentioned earlier, one might think that the crisis of public space is not as important as the other two. However, as David Harvey (2008) notes in *The Right to the City*, both historical and contemporary urbanization processes must be considered as one form of capital accumulation. The development of capitalism is closely linked to what form public space takes. "Grey areas," which are substitutes for this space, do not fulfill the important (from a democratic perspective) function of creating space for dispute. The disappearance of public space erases conflict from social consciousness and serves to silence narratives against the dominant discourse. As I have mentioned before, it is especially significant for groups with limited access to neoliberal debate. Public space is the only place to express their interests and create communities and alliances. Its disappearance means erasing voices opposing the monopoly of power and Capital from social consciousness. This phenomenon is even more worrying today when as Balkeley notes, monopolies are gaining power, and only united resistance will shape the "new normal" according to democratic values.

In the light of the public space crisis, street art's political function understood in the spirit of Rancière, becomes more significant. The subversive nature of public space that Baldini writes about enables questioning the hegemonic discourse that gives power and Capital the right to shape public space. It is even more critical given that as a result of pandemic-

related restrictions and market changes which Blakeley discusses, this right becomes a monopoly, and as a result, public space understood as a place of conflict ceases to exist. The only way to save it is to ensure that the interests of marginalized groups remain represented on the streets, even when they are empty. They will not be represented through commercial advertisements or a spectacle of power played out, as an exception, during national holidays in a pandemic public space. They might, however, be represented by grassroots movements of micro-resistance in the form of street art activity. Even when the streets are empty, they remind us that it is not a result of unified acceptance of the dominant narrative. In place of the absent bodies, they symbolically mark the existence of a community that expresses their resistance by introducing alternative narratives into the public space. By claiming the right to public space, they claim it for those who protest on the streets despite the restrictions and those deprived of this right by force or fear: they struggle for the right to position democratic values above the interests of Capital. One example of such a claim is the street art performance *List*, which I discuss in the next section.

***List* [Letter]**

In the context of the presented theories the performance *List* [Polish for “letter”] by Marta Czyż, Marianna Dobkowska, Magdalena Drągowska, Michał Frydrych, Karolina Grzywnowicz, Yulia Krivich, Julia Minasiewicz, Jan Możdżyński, Kuba Rudziński, Weronika Zalewska, and Paweł Żukowski, and its significance can be better understood. On May 6th, 2020, the artists walked through the center of Warsaw carrying a 14-meter-long and 2-meter-wide banner made to look like an envelope. According to the banner’s address data, the senders of the letter were the citizens, and the recipient was the Polish Sejm.⁷ Especially eye-catching was a large inscription reading “ŻYĆ NIE, UMIERAĆ” [TO NOT LIVE, TO DIE]⁸ and postal stamps with an image of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The banner references a work by Tadeusz Kantor, a Polish avant-garde artist who organized a similar happening in

⁷ The lower house of the Polish parliament

⁸ The slogan is a play on words of a Polish saying “Żyć nie umierać” literally “to live, to not die” which is translated as “Life could not be any better,” “this is the life,” “life’s a bed of roses,” “what more can you ask for?” or “it’s heaven on earth,” and even as something “to die for.” The Polish idiom is used to describe an extremely good situation, which could not get any better (and so it would be a shame to die in this moment). Adding the comma between the negation (nie) and die (umierać) changes the meaning to: “to not live, to die.”

1967. One can question whether performance art, in general, could be understood as street art. However, in the context of the previously discussed theories that primarily underline its subversiveness and immersion in public space, I believe it is legitimate to classify this particular case as street art. On the other hand, even referring to Riggles's classical definition, one can show that *List* drew its interpretative values from being placed on the street, which I analyze in the following paragraphs.

Since the end of Polish President Andrzej Duda's first term was approaching, the presidential election was supposed to occur on May 10th, 2020. Due to the worsening epidemiological situation, the ruling party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice] introduced and voted for a bill on conducting the election by mail. This proposal was criticized by lawyers, non-governmental organizations, the Polish Commissioner for Human Rights, and European institutions. Duda's rivals were also against the measure, pointing out, among other things, that due to the pandemic situation, campaigning has been impossible. However, according to polls at the time, the support for Duda (representing PiS) was diminishing, and a snap election increased his chances of winning. Despite the opposition's protest, the ruling party was preparing the infrastructure for postal voting, and it was only an internal conflict between PiS and their coalition parties in government that led to officially abandoning the idea on May 7th, 2020.

For a month, Polish citizens were living in uncertainty about the May 10th elections, surrounded by an atmosphere of chaos and absurdity. The possibility of conducting an election was seen as a health risk for all society, especially for mail carriers and other postal workers. Without detailed safety procedures, about 25 thousand mail carriers would be forced to deliver 30 million voting packages personally. The issue of delivering voting packages to those sick with the SARS-CoV-2 virus remained unsolved. The announcement of voting by mail led to protests from postal workers, criticism from representatives of labor unions, and a grassroots committee was threatening to strike. The social media profile "Pocztowcy czas na strajk" [Postal workers, it is time for a strike] posted: "It is time to mobilize! Postal voting will take place at the expense of our health and life! The government is wading into this craziness over our dead bodies! By working together, we can stop this!"⁹

⁹ See: [online] <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,173952,25853786,listonosze-skrzykuja-sie-na-strajk-przed-wyborami-rzad-brnie.html> [accessed: 20.12.2020].

When planning the happening, artists were conscientious about making sure it was in line with covid restrictions: they wore masks the whole time, the distance between them was 2,36m, and they had documents from Bęc Zmiana Foundation confirming that they are performing work duties commissioned by the foundation. Despite that, the police accompanied them throughout their march. At first, police officers did not record any violations, but when the artists reached Parliament, police tried to punish them with fines, which they refused to accept. Police also reported them to Sanitary Inspection, which fined two of the participants 10,000 PLN (approx. \$2,700). The fines were revoked after the intervention of Adam Bodnar, the Commissioner for Human Rights.

The police intervention during the performance *List* illustrates how broad the matter of street art (il)legality is. The action was *de iure* legal, as proven by the revoking of fines, but police made it *de facto* illegal. In this case, the subversiveness of the work was based on acting strictly according to the pandemic regulations. It was subversive because it complied with the restrictions and worked against the government's intentions. In the spirit of "making use" of art practices, propagated by Stephen Wright in *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (2013), this action exploited loopholes in the system of restrictions to expose its logic. On the one hand, it showed the absurdities: one may be at work, but one cannot protest; what if protesting is the artists' job? On the other, it meant that the performance could not be stopped using existing procedures. Despite that, the police decided to punish the artists by using pandemic restrictions as justification. We can recall here Chackal's claim *a rebus*: Street artworks can gain meaning from *legality* (2016, 369).

To interpret the aesthetic values of *List*, defined chiefly by its subversiveness, one cannot ignore the police intervention. Even if artists did not assume it (although we may guess that they were prepared for that), it still significantly contributed to the work's meaning. Different groups' contributions to an artwork over which the artist does not have any control is another feature of street art that creates its authenticity, as Adam Andrzejewski claims (2017, 175).¹⁰ We can imagine the police would not intervene if *List* were to be performed in a museum or some other art institution (or this intervention would mean something different to the work's interpretation)—only when performed outside did it gain its subversive nature.

¹⁰ Andrzejewski writes about these contributions as spontaneous. It may seem that it is not a proper adjective to describe police interventions, but as an eyewitness to a few of them during the Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet I believe that they are often not well-conceived.

The place of the police intervention in front of Parliament was also not random. Street art theorists (Chackal, 2016) and practitioners often emphasize the significance of location for street art practices. The more visible and dangerous the location of a localized artwork means that it is seen as more prestigious in the street art world. The case of *List* shows that these are often localizations of powerful institutions trying to exclude counter-narratives from their surroundings and take control over visibility.

Using their artistic skills, participants in the performance presented postal workers' demands in a public space. The desperate reaction of government officials to *List* shows that this type of visibility is a means in the struggle for the rights of marginalized groups. Paradoxically, by trying to suppress this form of protest, the officials ensured a larger audience, i.e., it resulted in the Streisand effect. The media started showing pictures of the banner, which was supposed to result in a fine of 20,000 PLN. These actions in the spirit of activism assume that their aesthetic properties are equally important to the message they send. In this case, the context of the artistic avant-garde of Kantor's performance was an excuse to take on an essential social demand. The slogan "TO NOT LIVE, TO DIE" raised the issue that postal workers pointed out in their threat of striking. Faced with the danger of epidemiologically terrible work conditions experienced by many workers during the pandemic forced by employers to risk their health and life, postal workers gained unlikely allies: artists. This work illustrates the double meaning of street art in the face of a crisis of public space during the pandemic. It is fighting to reclaim public space once again by exposing the conflict that has been erased while exposing the mechanisms of state power that exploit pandemic-related restrictions to erase contrary discourses and appropriate public space.

By taking the protest to the street, the artists claimed public space as a space of conflict. Contrary to the narrative about "national unanimity," they reminded us that there is a significant crack in society regarding judging the government's actions. It soon turned out that *List* was a precursor to how a few months later, the pandemic-related restrictions would be used to crack down on any sign of disagreement in public space and become a symbol of the hundreds of summons from police stations that protesters in Poland are now receiving.

Conclusion

Public space from which the community has been pushed out stops being public. It becomes an empty place of power and Capital acting together. In such conditions, street art becomes a tool for reclaiming this space by exposing the mechanisms of its appropriation and introducing alternative narratives into it. The subversive nature of such activities makes public space a place to stand up for the right to the city, as Harvey (2008, 23) notes: "The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city." Both this right and a democratic community are much more endangered during the pandemic. By changing the city, street art is a form of micro-resistance that also changes us. The revolution predicted by Žižek and Blakeley thus has an essential ally in street art. After all, as Austin (2010, 44) writes: "A revolution that does not allow citizens to write on the city walls can be no revolution at all."

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