Doctoral Program in Culture Studies of the Lisbon Consortium at the Faculty of Human Sciences – Universidade Católica Portuguesa

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Hope in the Squatted Space: The Case of Metelkova

Amadea Kovič

Abstract

This paper takes as its point of departure the Autonomous Cultural Centre Metelkova City (AKC Metelkova mesto), a squatted area of more than twelve thousand square meters that is today recognised as a self-organised autonomous zone, located at the heart of Ljubljana. After the partition of Yugoslavia, the complex of ex-military headquarters of the Yugoslav Army remained as a remnant of the past. However, its social function soon mutated when it became an artistic hub, hosting activities of various cultural and non-governmental organisations. Furthermore, it has established its own set of rules, declaring a strict policy of non-tolerance for racism, homophobia, sexism, and ageism.

This paper aims to explore the juxtaposition between Metelkova as a bubble space with its unique set of rules, fostering a system of self-governance, and the greater context of authority within which it is embedded. While it refuses to be submissive to the overarching functional structures in place, Metelkova is forced to continuously navigate the balance between individual freedom of its users and the need for a clear system of self-governance, enabling it to be a safe communal space. The purpose of this critical analysis is to unravel multiple layers of the interrelated relationship between Metelkova's squatting status, leaving the space and its community in a limbo of constant uncertainty, and the hope for utopia, expressed in its system of self-governance. Building upon Ntounis and Kanellopoulou (2017)'s proposition of place branding as a key element in normalisation of legally ambiguous autonomous zones such as Metelkova or similar Christiania in Denmark, as well as Mouffe's understanding of critical cultural and artistic practices as vital for the development of agonistic public spaces (2013, 91-93), I argue that the squatting element that defines the continuous (re-)creation of Metelkova is intrinsic for its development as an agonistic public space.

Keywords: Metelkova / squat / public space / hope / tolerance

Bio note

Amadea Kovič is a third-year PhD student of the International Doctoral Program in Culture Studies of the Lisbon Consortium at the Faculty of Human Sciences – Universidade Católica Portuguesa with the support of the EDP Foundation. With her background in Art History and Slovene Studies, her research interests include contemporary and activist visual art. Her ongoing PhD research focuses on investigating contemporary feminist visual art production in Portugal and Slovenia.

Navigating the Place: Between the Tourist Attraction and Everyday Reality

There is a tree growing on that roof.

That might be the first thought on one's mind when entering the autonomous cultural zone Metelkova mesto, encapsulating the robustly decorated complex of buildings hosting various ateliers, clubs, and collectives. With its partial illegality fostering feelings of danger and excitement, Metelkova presents itself as almost an organic being, continuously transforming and evolving. There is always a new sculpture to be added, a mural to be painted, an activist message to be written. Packed with visitors during night, during the day Metelkova alternates; the shiny mosaics and murals become more visible in stark sun, and lingering tourists can be observed, taking pictures of make-do urbanism and artistic interventions that caught their attention. Metelkova is defined by the multiplicity of its layers; behind the alternative music clubs acting as Metelkova's forefront, numerous organisations and artists' studios persisted throughout the years, enabling spaces for the development of multicultural dialogues and community-oriented work.

With the commencement of Yugoslavia's long-awaited fragmentation in 1991, followed by the final breakup in 1992, the memories of the old regime could be found everywhere; among them, a complex of ex-military headquarters no longer serving its purpose. Initially hosting the Austro-Hungarian forces, the military barracks were after the First World War overtaken by the Yugoslav Army. Due to dissolvement of Yugoslavia, in the beginning of the 1990s the buildings became rapidly vacated. With the space drifting on a thin line between abandonment and eventual deterioration, the Network for Metelkova was formed, consisting of more than two hundred organizations, proposing the redevelopment of the space as a cultural hub within the city structure. Nonetheless, while the municipality was not opposing the idea, since the new country was defining itself anew in an independent form around the space in question, the proposed plans for the redevelopment did not advance at the needed speed. These uncertain conditions resulted in the birth of Metelkova as we know it today, in the shape of Metelkova City Autonomous Cultural Centre (Avtonomni kulturni center Metelkova mesto). In the night between 10th and 11th September 1993 activists took over Metelkova, and since 1995, the space persists as an autonomous zone, hosting hundreds of cultural activities.

As Arnold Berleant observes, “the aesthetic of the city is an aesthetic of engagement (1992, 97), and since its origins, two things were clear: Metelkova inhabitants do not wish to be treated as subversive to the municipal authority, and aim to build and preserve their own community, crucially defined by freedom of creative expression. Nonetheless, in order to maintain social order and ensure safety of hundreds of thousands of domestic and international guests that continue to visit the cultural centre, they have declared a strict set of rules, explicitly listing various forms of illicit behavior that are not permitted in the autonomous zone, from racism to homophobia, sexism, and ageism. Thus, while the autonomous zone refuses to be governed by the social structures in place, the necessities of everyday living require the inhabitants to apply many of the basic limitations on the individual freedom, needed for the convivial and safe existence of residents and visitors. How does the system of self-governance translate the hope of utopia in the case of Metelkova?

Radical Rebuilding: Repurposing the Barracks

From its emergence in the 1960s, street art has played important role in sparking social and economic movements of the twentieth and twenty-first century (Cowick 2015, 29). However, when it comes to the subject of subversiveness as an intrinsic characteristic of street art, the debate in the academic community is brimming with divergent views. While Baldini claims that street art is in its essence subversive (2016, 188), Riggle opposes this idea by stating that it is rather using the street in order to facilitate self-expression, thus supporting the cultural component of the street (2016, 191-193). Furthermore, for many people a city, particularly one with heavy investment in industrial production, presents “the antithesis of the aesthetic” (Berleant 1992, 82); street art such as colourful and elaborate murals can therefore also assume another objective through unifying a community spirit by enriching a neighbourhood.

Building on Foucault’s understanding of heterotopias as places defined by their quality of otherness (1986), Ntounis and Kanellopoulou (2017) examine the cases of Metelkova in Slovenia and Christiania in Denmark, both examples of culturally significant squatting places that have been built on the grounds of former military establishments. Tracing the uncanny processes leading to their continuous existence despite engaging in

decades of subversive behavior towards local and state regulations, they propose that place branding, the action of transforming a certain place into a type of brand, is key for the normalisation of jurisdictional heterotopias which hold uncertain status in terms of their legal presence (2223-2240).

While Ntounis and Kanellopoulou (2017) consider Metelkova and Christiania as examples of jurisdictional heterotopias, distinguished by their otherness in terms of legal status, Siegrist and Thörn, who also examine Metelkova as a heterotopic site, on the other hand define it "both as part of the creative city brand and as an autonomous space, demarcated from and positioned against the political, social and economic activities of the city" (2020, 1837). According to them, the heterotopias in question are not defined by their overemphasized illegality; instead, they argue that what separates both Christiania and Metelkova

> "from legal grey zones such as red light districts or spaces for selling drugs that are controlled by criminal gangs (often also conceptualised as hetero-topia), is their character as spaces for social movement activism, anti-systemic cri-tique and anti-capitalist alternatives, which is why we will suggest and develop the notion of autonomous heterotopia as a more accurate conceptualisation" (Siegrist, and Thörn 2020, 1839).

Siegrist and Thörn (2020) thus bring forward the activist aspect of culturally significant heterotopias, arguing that its influence should not be overshadowed by the legal status of the site. This correlates with Chantal Mouffe's assertion that critical cultural and artistic practices are vital when it comes to building agonistic public spaces (2013, 91-93). Following this argument, I propose that the squatting status that defines Metelkova is paradoxically enabling its continuous existence since it fosters the creative element elevating the autonomous cultural zone to a uniquely protected position, defined and maintained by the presence of both national as well as international attention.

Bloch's work on utopia is defined by the distinction between abstract and concrete utopias, with the former being crucially determined by wish and the latter by will to foster change; thus, while abstract utopia expresses desire, only a concrete utopia is characterized by the capability to bear hope (Levitas 1990, 15). However, building on a similar distinction between real and wished upon, Foucault defined utopias in opposition to heterotopias. Rather than limited to particular real places, utopias represent the most idealized, perfected and polished versions of society. On the other hand, heterotopias are a type of counter-sites that

can juxtapose various otherwise incompatible aspects in a single real place (1986, 24-25). As observed, they are distinguished by the paradoxical duality of their existence, encapsulated in

> "a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a bar- racks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures" (Foucault 1986, 26).

Thus, while heterotopias often strive to present alternative options to various aspects of normativity, they are at the same time defined by specific rules and rituals that permit visitors the entrance. Since these spaces often aim to offer a high degree of personal freedom that attracts visitors, they at the same time need to maintain rules that restrict their freedom in order to ensure safety for all. The short list of "BASIC RULES" applied at Metelkova is fairly straightforward and practical, while also reflecting hope for a creation of a certain type of utopian community. It demands the visitors to not engage in any sort of violent or discriminatory behavior, based on age, gender, sexual orientation or race, as well as harassment, theft, drug dealing or substance abuse. However, despite Metelkova's traditional antagonistic quality and self-declaration of being an 'autonomous zone', the rules warn potential violators that the occurrence of most severe incidents could result in interference with police.

This testifies to the fact that despite Metelkova's objective to create a bubble space outside the reach of local and state authorities, the cultural centre needs various concrete limits in order to function on a daily basis. As noted by Ganjavie who examined Ernst Bloch's utopia within the context of urban design, according to Bloch, "utopia reaches its demise the moment it becomes institutionalized, at which point society needs to look at new utopias" (2015, 96). Thus, maintaining the intricate balance between the systems of support and their interference is key to preserving the hope for utopia expressed in Metelkova's rules. While the zone crucially relies on the attention and presence of national and international visitors, it needs to provide a certain level of security in order to guarantee their continuous appearance at the site. As the internal authority that holds Metelkova together is not enough to adequately protect the cultural centre from the most alarming incidents, Metelkova relies on the external figures of authority to present a last resort towards various types of behavior that could potentially endanger the carefully constructed yet fragile equilibrium. This type

of reliance deepens the symbiotic relationship with the local authorities, based on mutual tolerance.

Tovarna Rog and Hostel Celica: Living with Uncertainty

To further examine and illustrate the processes that led to status quo within which Metelkova's prolonged subversive state of existence paradoxically plays an important role for its preservation, we now turn to the cultural centre's close neighbor: Tovarna Rog. In time of Yugoslavia, Tovarna Rog was long a stellar example of a successful business, producing and exporting high-quality bikes. However, during the four decades passed between the factory's creation in 1951 and 1991, the circumstances have changed heavily. After the production line was relocated, the old complex was abandoned. The former bicycle factory of approximately 7,000 square meters has been occupied in 2006, and has since then operated as a multicultural hub for a myriad of cultural and communal activities, ranging from rave parties to holding a soup kitchen.[1] While Metelkova holds the status of one of the major squatted spaces in Europe, thus being attractive to external visitors, Tovarna Rog did not acquire quite an equal level of international recognition, despite the fact that both cultural hubs exist in close proximity to each other, organize similar events and are defined by their long-lasting squatting status. While Tovarna Rog has been dedicated to organizing a plethora of cultural activities, it lacks Metelkova's comprehensive infrastructure, attracting international tourists interested in complex murals, sculptures, and mosaics found all over the squatted space. Despite its prolonged existence, Tovarna Rog has had significantly less luck in preserving its subversive status; in January 2021, the municipality exercised its power, evicted residents and tore down part of the complex.

Now, the obvious question arises: why has one of the two similar 'autonomous zones', created after the fall of Yugoslavia and located within a walking distance from each other, had less luck in preserving itself from external intervention and regulation than the other? While Metelkova holds a well-organized infrastructure, Tovarna Rog had less to offer in terms of touristic attraction. Metelkova relies on visitors' attention to survive: not only in terms of money spent in clubs, but most importantly due to the fact that their continuous

[1] "Tovarna Rog". n. d. *Culture.si*. Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia/Ljudmila Art and Science Laboratory. https://www.culture.si/en/Depot:Tovarna_Rog. Accessed November 15, 2021.

presence puts Metelkova on international map, establishing its status of indispensable cultural heritage. This allows the centre to claim its unique status without further regulation of the space, as that would interfere with its unique cultural essence. Holding almost a mythical status, Metelkova can escape a great part of the regulatory process, providing a place where most rules do not apply – but just enough that it still functions in an orderly way. This allows it to exist in a peculiar state of proactive limbo, continuously evolving while simultaneously rejecting and embracing the overarching systems and structures of authority.

To illustrate what this means in practical terms, let us now turn to the example of Hostel Celica[2]. While the core of Metelkova's structure grew on the skeletons of army barracks, the building on Metelkova 8 used to serve the function of a military prison. Conveniently repurposed into a hostel, with prison cells transformed into unique art pieces by dozens of international artists, the establishment for many years offered the visitors an attractive experience of spending the night in a former prison cell, still equipped with bars on the window. The concept was attracting a lot of attention and thus the hostel was functioning successfully for many years, linking the former history of Metelkova with commercial side of the present.

Nevertheless, in 2018 the municipality applied its authority; faced with the prospect of the iconic hostel being sold, the Metelkova community and its supporters organized themselves to express their discontent. Among other expressions of protest, an exhibition was held in Hostel Celica's Gallery Srečišče, in support of it remaining under the current governance instead of being transformed after selling. These joint effects were not completely fruitless. While Hostel Celica underwent a significant makeover, it was never sold and maintained most of its original features. With its looks polished under the new management of the Ljubljana Castle, the original concept of the hostel as well as most of its visual features remained intact.

The value of Metelkova has been clearly expressed not only in commercial value but also through the increased media attention and community engagement, highlighting the importance that this heterotopic site holds within the city structure. While the municipality has the power to demand a higher degree of regulation, the status that Metelkova has built

[2] 'Celica' in Slovenian means a cell – in this case, a prison cell as a reference to the building's former function as a military prison.

over the course of years is too beneficial for the authorities to dismantle it, as shown by the case of Hostel Celica. On the other hand, Tovarna Rog attracts significantly less international attention towards the city, and maintaining the status quo has in that case proved not beneficial for the authorities that hold power over the site.

Moving Forward

Despite its seemingly anarchic organization, Metelkova in reality possesses a well-balanced infrastructure that enables it transferring through changes in governance. While the recent pandemic provided the municipal authorities a greater degree of flexibility to modify and interfere within the existing structures, such as Tovarna Rog, Metelkova's status is protected by its place on the national and international map. With its squatting status defined by legal uncertainty, Metelkova's community exists under the system of self-governance. Defined by basic rules, Metelkova relies on the municipal authority as a final authority responsible for maintaining the needed social order. The municipality on the other hand holds an equivocal relationship towards Metelkova's unregulated status, choosing to – in most cases – not to exercise the full extent of its power in order to achieve a highest degree of regulation of the space. Further regulation of Metelkova would mean interfering with its internationally recognized unique status of autonomous and self-organized cultural infrastructure. Due to having the freedom to operate outside the norms, Metelkova has cultivated an internationally recognized cultural hub, hosting numerous artists, collectives, cultural activities, festivals, concerts, and lectures. Thus, the squatting status in place actually benefits both seemingly opposing parties – Metelkova's community and the municipal authority.

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