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## Public art as meditation on public time<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** In this paper, we draw attention to temporal aspects of works of art displayed, performed, or held in public spaces, generally designated as public art. We argue that the debate on public art has been biased towards discussing the spatial. We focus on the “temporariness” of public art, the primary temporal feature that has been under scrutiny in recent philosophical literature on public art. We explore arguments it has been woven into. In particular, we discuss and reject using temporariness as the mark dissecting the realm of public art into two different artforms and argue that it is just one of many temporal properties public artworks have and can use to bear meanings. We outline other ways works of public art bear temporal features and interact with temporal properties of spaces they occupy, and argue that those too are, potentially, aesthetically significant. We illustrate some of these with an example of a particular public artistic site, the open-air art gallery «ArtWall» located in Prague, the Czech Republic.

**Keywords:** Public art, Memorials, Street art, Ephemerality, Temporality.

In her latest book, Nomi Claire Lazar argues that time, however natural it feels, is always constructed, mediated by marks and measures, and endlessly malleable. All experienced time is, Lazar says, shaped time. There are different ways to construe it: *via* calendars and clocks, but also by noticing a change of seasons, for example, or patterns of traffic. In Lazar’s view, the latter also qualifies as technology, for «any reasonably regular event series can be used to measure time» (Lazar [2019]: 18). Time technologies that we experience time

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through are thus either found (e.g., sunrise), or constructed mechanically (e.g., clocks). In either case, however, time is also shaped conceptually (e.g., *via* a concept of progress): clocks can be taken to measure the time flying away, or its endless return and repetition. Although time technologies help us to experience the shape of time, they do not, by themselves, impose a shape on it<sup>2</sup>.

In this paper, we propose the idea that works of public art often aim to reflect on a shape of time and suggest that, in addition to conceptual re-shaping, time is also malleable aesthetically. The paper proceeds as follows. We begin by arguing that the debate on public art in aesthetics has been biased towards discussing the spatial, rather than temporal aspects of the artworks in question. We then focus on a primary temporal aspect of public art that is often noted, its temporariness (or ephemerality), and investigate the roles it plays in recent philosophical literature. We argue that temporariness has been given two roles: it has been considered as a somewhat prominent aesthetic feature of contemporary public art, and it has been understood as a standard feature of a newly coined category of contemporary public art. While we defend the former approach, we argue that works of public art have also recruited other temporal properties to pursue their aesthetic aim. Working with an example of an open-air art exhibition space located in Prague, we explain how a better understanding of the temporality of works of public art may help us to see why these works are valuable as works of public art.

«Public art» has been a contested category in recent literature. In practice, the label usually covers works of art displayed, performed, or held in public spaces – memorials and public sculptures as well as outdoor performances and art interventions; in theory, its scope has been disputed and new labels have been coined to designate some

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<sup>2</sup> In her book, Lazar argues that it is a common mistake to conceive mechanically measured time, as introduced by clocks, as the time shaped in a particular way, e.g., as modern, non-cyclical and, allegedly, non-natural time. (Lazar [2019]: 32f).

out-of-the-museum-door artistic practices as different from a narrower class of «public art». While we argue against one way of dissecting the scope of public art into discrete units later, we concur with those who have emphasized a critical, or, as we prefer to say, reflective function of public art regarding the idea of the public and the common in a broad sense (Phillips [1989], Hein [1996]), i.e., of what has been in political discourse often called «the common good» and which relates to our «public lives» (Hussain [2018]). In this sense, the aim of public art as public art, in most general terms, is an aesthetic reflection of the public. As we show in the following part, this aim has been mostly understood in terms of public space.

## I.

The aesthetics of public art has, understandably enough, devoted much space to the relationship between works of art and public space<sup>3</sup>. Two of the conditions that a work is supposed to meet to be classified as public art are related to its spatiality: its accessibility and site-specificity. Public art should be freely and readily accessible to everyone. Public art is also supposed to interact with its environment in some way or another. Both conditions are currently being debated in literature<sup>4</sup>. Some scholars argue that accessibility should

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<sup>3</sup> In the mother tongue of the authors, which shapes their pre-philosophical intuitions, the collocation «public art» is relatively infrequent, being usually substituted by the equivalent of «art in public space».

<sup>4</sup> We confine the discussion to these two features. These are not, however, the only ones being discussed in the literature. For example, Sondra Bacharach, who wishes to distinguish «public art» and «street art», claims that public art is officially sanctioned, institutionally supported, and usually subsidized by tax money (Bacharach [2015]). We do not agree that that the boundary can be drawn in line with the type of the artworks' sponsorship or commissioner – the network of agentive relations surrounding each artwork (its initiators, creators, owners, institutions, and publics) is too complex, unstable, and messy to help one create neat categories. We do not think, moreover, that there is a need to strictly separate the two

be understood not only in physical terms, but also in social, epistemic, and aesthetic terms (Adamu, Castello, Cukuier [2019], Willard [2019]). Similarly, the environment that the public work of art is supposed to interact with has been reconceived in non-physical terms (Hein [1996], Kwon [1997]).

Mary Beth Willard offers an interesting shift in the debate. She considers the two conditions as evaluative properties. She argues that both accessibility and site-specificity are gradable properties (the work can be more or less accessible and/or site-specific) and the higher a work scores on both, the more valuable it is. When talking about site-specificity, she argues that to be site-specific means that the work in question achieves its artistic or aesthetic aims at least partly via «its precise location» (Willard [2019]: 7); site-specific works are, she says, «embodied meditation of the use of public space» (Willard [2019]: 8). To be accessible, on the other hand, the work needs to be sufficiently pretty, aesthetically satisfactory to everyone<sup>5</sup>.

Let us focus on the first feature Willard singles out. Other things being equal, the work of public art is more successful as public art, the more site-specificity it achieves. This explains why we find works that can be placed anywhere less valuable – be it *Forever Marilyn*, a giant sculpture of Monroe by Seward Johnson, which has traveled the world (Willard's own example), or any of numerous examples of «plop art», a derogatory term (coined by Rachel Whiteread) signifying

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categories, «public art» and «street art»: many artists she refers to would find it confusing that they are classified as «street artists» and not as «public artists». *Pace* Bacharach as well as Riggle (as discussed later) and Andrzejewski (2017), in this essay we do not distinguish «street art» from «public art».

<sup>5</sup> Accessibility is, for Willard, a multivocal word. An important subtype of it is what we call «aesthetic accessibility», (Willard calls it «epistemic accessibility»), which she defines as an «ease of aesthetic appreciation». Willard further argues that there is an inner tension between the two desiderata, i.e., the more satisfying the work is with respect to one of them, the less it is, necessarily, with respect to the other. A perfect balance between them is a delicate matter and, as witnessed by a relatively low number of successful public works of art, it is rare to achieve.

public art that can be dropped anywhere (Knight [2014]). Site-specificity, however, is too general a term, covering many different relationships between a work and its environs, and it seems that not all site-specific works would pass what Willard understands as site-specificity in relation to public art. Miwon Kwon, for example, distinguishes between interruptive and assimilative site-specificity<sup>6</sup>; the former, and not the latter, seems closer to the way Willard understands the concept. What does site-specificity mean with respect to public art then? As a work of public art, the work should be related to the site in a specific way: to meditate, as Willard herself has it, on the use of public space, that is on the way a particular site works as a public space. A highly site-specific public artwork thus often brings about a disruptive experience, «forcing commuters to interact with it, and forcing them to think about how they» normally use the specific place (Willard [2019]: 7-8). The above-mentioned works possibly fail, as works of public art, because they did not manage to rephrase the idea of public space by means of their locations.

We thus suggest a revision of Willard's argument. We argue that site-specificity is not a desideratum of public art *per se*, but because it is a potent way to achieve public art's aim, which is a reflection of the common good. This aim can be (and has been) realized in many ways. Since «public space» has been so important for our society and its understanding of the common good, site-specificity – as a dialogue with a site in terms of its use as public space – is a likely candidate for the critical function works of public art perform; it is not, however, the only property works of public art have that can be recruited in this way. In the following discussion on temporality of public art, we offer reconsideration of another noted feature of works (their temporariness) in terms of its potential to perform a critical or «meditative» function that public art is supposed to hold as public art. We propose that it does so by helping

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<sup>6</sup> Kwon follows Rosalyn Deutsche in this respect. See (Kwon [1997]: 85 and 3n).

us to shape another potent dimension of public lives, public time.

## II.

Although «physical space» in the debate has been gradually replaced by «social space» or «social sphere», which is, arguably, as much a temporal category as a spatial one, temporal aspects of public art have not been sufficiently explored<sup>7</sup> – with an important exception. The life cycle of contemporary works of public art is described as relatively short, and their authors, as well as recipients, expect them to «die», either naturally, as the works are made from non-lasting materials and exposed to forces of nature, or intentionally, by the artist's decision, an act of vandalism, power, or under layers of overlapping commentaries<sup>8</sup>. The temporal dimension of contemporary works of public art has thus been considered mainly in terms of their temporariness or ephemerality.

Patricia Phillips, who published an essay titled *Temporality in Public Art* in «Art Journal» in 1989, argues that public art needs to be «committed to the temporary»<sup>9</sup>. She reviews several successful public art projects taking place in New York City in the period of early 1970's to late 1980's and notices that all of them were deliberately short-lived. This feature, she argues, is a part of their meaning structure. In reference to Alfredo Jaar's *Rushes* (1986), a poster installation held for barely a month at a New York subway platform, she claims that the temporary character of the

exhibition «accentuates the urgency of the ideas» it expresses (Phillips [1989]: 335). The fact that works of contemporary public art are short-lived also, she says, underscores their experimental character and their ability to give space to actual topics and issues. At some places of her essay, though, she seems to be implying more: temporariness of public art is not only a matter of emphasis. By being temporary, these works are *about* time: about the relationship between the permanent and the unstable, which was, according to her, so acutely needed. Contemporary public art is, for her, «a forum of investigation, articulation, and constructive reappraisal» of the idea of time itself (Phillips [1989]: 331).

Time is also built into the very idea of public art for W.J.T. Mitchell, who speaks about «a certain fragility of temporariness in public artworks themselves» (Mitchell [1990]: 885). By being destroyable and frequently destroyed, they, as he claims, establish «new relations between the traditional «timeless» work of art and the transient generations, the “publics”, that are addressed by it» (Mitchell [1990]: 885). A fitting example of this strategy, though understandably not mentioned by Mitchell in 1990, is *The Skoghall Konsthall* (2000), a more recent work by Alfredo Jaar. The artist was invited to create a work of public art by a small Swedish town, which was hoping to get on the map of contemporary art in the country. He designed a light building made of wood and paper which was set on fire the night after it was open to the public – a gesture of destruction particularly poignant at the backdrop of the town officials' hope for eternity. As phrased by Claire Doherty, who selected this work as the paradigmatic case of contemporary public art, the work «unsettles the lifespan of public art by demonstrating that the fleeting moment might be more valuable than the permanent, static public sculpture» (Doherty [2015]: 11-12).

Phillips and Mitchell thus concur that works of public art serve as a critical device designed to question a conception of time associated with art and the values it represents. By emphasizing their own transience, these works change the shape

<sup>7</sup> Curtis L. Carter, for example, literally finishes his essay on sculpture by claiming: «The temporal dimension is of particular significance in public sculpture, as it can involve history as well as thought and actions in real time» (Carter [2005]: 653). He does not, unfortunately, elaborate on this further.

<sup>8</sup> Commentaries surrounding and even overlapping the work are considered by Adam Andrzejewski as an indicator of the work's success in the context of street art. See Andrzejewski (2017).

<sup>9</sup> «Public art requires a more passionate commitment to the temporary – to the information culled from the short-lived project» (Phillips [1989]: 331).



of time as it is imposed by the concept of art. It is because these works fail to meet the temporal expectations evoked by the idea of an artwork – its endurance, eternity of its message, and, as the phrase goes, its testability by time<sup>10</sup> – that they may be read as speaking about a different kind of time, the uncertain, accelerating, and fragmentary time of our age. The fact that those works are temporary becomes a part of their meaning structure and turns into an aesthetic evaluative property, i.e., a property relevant to the appreciation of an artwork as public art, because it initiates a dialogue with a conception of public time.<sup>11</sup> By being temporary, these works initiate a dialogue with a particular conception of public time, the one presented by most works of public art of the past (e.g., memorials).

What Mitchell and Phillips do is thus analogous to a theoretical move described above in relation to Willard: a particular property (temporariness and site-specificity, respectively) is understood in terms of its role in appraisal of the work as a work of public art (reflecting the common good, e.g., public space and public time, respectively). Although temporariness has played an important role in public art recently, it is worth emphasizing that not all temporary works single out temporariness as their evaluative property. Only if temporariness is thematized by the artist (Deprez [2020]) may it turn out to be a significant, or even pivotal, aspect that underlies the work's evaluation as a work of public art. Moreover, not all works that are temporary significantly call for their interpretation in the scope of public time as presented by the concept of art (as both Mitchell and Phillips suggest). For instance, Olafur

Eliasson and Minik Rosing's *Ice Watch* – twenty-four blocks of ice transported from Greenland and installed in front of the Tate Modern in December 2018 (discussed by Deprez) – accentuated temporariness by literally melting away in front of the public. Their temporariness, however, should be interpreted not as a critique of the art's alleged eternity, but the one of nature.

We would like to distinguish the view that considers temporariness as a relatively common meaning-bearing property of works of public art from a different one which also concerns temporariness, but uses it to achieve a different theoretical goal. Some scholars have written about temporariness of public art not in terms of its potential for evaluation, but as the criterion dissecting the category of public art into two essentially different artforms.

It is wrong, those scholars say, to think about contemporary public art practices as belonging to the same artform as memorials and public statues: the latter, it is claimed, aim at eternity, while the former exemplify the lack of it. Nicholas Riggle, for one, distinguishes «street art» and «public art» using a criterion of ephemerality (Riggle [2010]). In his terminology, it is «street art» which is necessarily temporary, «committed to temporality», while «public art» aims at permanency. Other labels – such as «new genre public art» – have been used to touch the same distinction between «old» and «new» artistic practices performed in the public space and mark it by their contrasting temporal features.

However, if the aim is to create a new category of art, then relying on temporariness does not seem to be the best strategy. First, the aim itself is questionable: maintaining one category for both types of public art, i.e., (allegedly) the traditional as well as the recent one, seems to be more desirable for the sake of philosophical (or art-historical) parsimony and it is also, arguably, more accordant with the common practice. Second, although some works happen to be temporary, they could also be otherwise (and *vice versa*): being temporary is an accidental property for many of the works in question. And finally, coining a new artform, be

<sup>10</sup> For Anthony Savile, great works are those that pass the test of time; hence, the works which are temporary are not even eligible for this kind of aesthetic value (Savile [1982]).

<sup>11</sup> Our concept of aesthetic evaluative property is close to what Eelen M. Deprez calls «meaning-bearing properties», i.e., «features or aspects of a work (visible or invisible) that are imbued with significance» (Deprez [2020]). We argue that some works of public art thematize the concept of time by being temporary.

it «new genre public art» or «street art», based on the work's inherent impermanence, would make it difficult to understand those works for which temporariness *is* significant. Let me elaborate on the third reason.

Vigorously temporary artworks, such as *The Skoghall Konsthall*, seem to work only against the backdrop of a category that does incorporate permanent works. Because the expectation of permanence is called forth, burning the *Konsthall* down is such a powerful gesture. If there was a special category of new public art which is, standardly, short-lived, its ephemerality would tend to, aesthetically, disappear<sup>12</sup>. Put differently, if ephemerality is a constitutive feature of (new) public art, then these works are no longer «about» time, at least not by virtue of their being temporary or ephemeral.

While temporariness fails as a standard feature of (new) public art, it is a good candidate for a property that, if it happens to be a part of the meaning of the work in question, enables understanding of how the reflective or critical function works of public art are supposed to perform can run. By questioning temporal expectations generated by the concept of art, it contributes to a critical debate on public time as it is shaped by art, its practices, and institutions.

### III.

At the beginning of this essay, we referred to the book by Lazar, who discusses «time» in terms of different «temporalities», i.e., appearances of time as shaped. She emphasizes that there are many ways to lay out time experience and that

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<sup>12</sup> Although Walton argues, in his essay, that standard properties are not always aesthetically ineffective, they primarily «serve to determine what *kind* of a representation the work is»; their aesthetic force, if any, tends to be always relegated to the backdrop of aesthetic evaluation which is, primarily, focused on variable properties (Walton [1970]: 346). In my opinion, Willard (2019), who builds her theory on Walton, misses this point when she requires that site-specificity and accessibility be both standard and *primary* aesthetic evaluative features of public art.

we are capable of switching from one shape to the other depending on circumstances and aims. The time of a mother-to-be, who experiences it «analogously», via her own body, flows differently, more densely in a way, than time experienced next to a newly born child, which jumps from one snapshot to the other<sup>13</sup>. But the shape of time can also be changed on a more general level. The time of our great grandmothers, we believe, moved differently than our owns.

Although our lives may be embedded in several different temporalities, among which we can easily switch under relevant circumstances, some of them can seem to be more natural than other ones – reinforced by being «standardized» and shared with other members of society. Lazar traces shapes of time made visible during times of upheavals or regime changes, via acts and words of those in power, but many sociologists of time have focused on the way time is filtered and molded by the sciences, technologies, institutions, and businesses. Each age seems to have its own time and ours has been discussed mainly in terms of acceleration and consequent desynchronization, i.e., the «tension between the accelerative pace of modern social structures and the increasing inability to accommodate this pace by individuals and social institutions» (Vostal [2015]: 72)<sup>14</sup>.

In this essay, we have occasionally referred to «public time» to express the idea of a time shape being imposed on our experience in politically or socially effective ways. Public time is the time that we live in and share as members of society, a time-frame (or timeframes) imposed on our lives. If we are right that the aim of public art is to reflect on the idea of the public and the common, then public time is as good a candidate for aesthetic reconsideration as public space. Works of public art may help us to reflect on the shape of public time and question a claim on its universal availability,

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<sup>13</sup> This is our own formulation, not Lazar's one. Lazar mentions, however, that «a nursing mother's day may be marked by the baby's sleeping, waking, and feeding, regardless of the clock» (Lazar [2019]: 28).

<sup>14</sup> He is referring here to Hartmut Rosa's influential concepts and analyses.

as well as track and emphasize some of the available alternatives.

Some authors have noticed that in the age of acceleration, museums of art have played the role of «oases of deceleration»<sup>15</sup>, and thus, by giving an alleged relief from the pressure, fit into a temporal landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century all too well<sup>16</sup> – another grist for the mill of those who speak about public art's commitment to the temporary and understand it, primarily, as a critique oriented towards the shape of time imposed by the concept of art. We are sympathetic to this argument; yet we believe that there are other temporal properties that works of public art have and by means of which they can perform their function as works of public art.

It seems that time has always been at the forefront of public art. Take monuments and memorials. The very material that many memorials use – stone – can accrue temporal meaning and become part of their meaning structure, charging the subject of their representation with the aura of permanence<sup>17</sup>. As reminders of historical events, they often arouse – to use the term coined by Derek Turner (Turner [2019]: 7) – «stereotemporal» experience, helping us to see how history has changed the site they are displayed at: the shape of time thus becomes literally visible for us to explore. Monuments are, to be sure, often politically commissioned: as reminders of either the great or the terrible, they form our relationship to the past and the way we understand it as related

<sup>15</sup> «Oasis of deceleration» is another term coined by Hartmut Rosa, see (Vostal [2015]: 74).

<sup>16</sup> Verhagen, for example, notices that «social acceleration has revitalized the image of the museum as a pole of resistance to the quickening dynamics of contemporary existence» (131); he, however, criticizes such image of the museum as false. To be resistant, it does not suffice that the work is exhibited in the «slow» museum; it needs to create «a dialogue with its temporal environment» (135). That, as Verhagen richly illustrates, may lead to uncovering the time of the museum as composed of different time-zones and realizing that some of those are as accelerated as our public lives (Verhagen [2020]).

<sup>17</sup> Higgins (2019) says that stones are «ready symbols for permanence» (12).

to our present. And finally, the gesture of erecting a memorial is as time-shaping as the gesture of its removal: although the latter is often motivated by specific political or social reasons, it may also signal the need to change the temporal horizon, to reshape public time. In our reading, both acts are part and parcel of what memorials are.

With respect to the last aspect of a memorial's temporality, it is worth noting that their erection and removals are not the only gestures that are regularly connected to them. Most memorials and public sculptures are surrounded by a variety of public acts, from laying state representatives wreaths, to serving as meeting places for demonstrations, to diverse interventions by (mostly anonymous) artists<sup>18</sup>. Understanding memorials as foci of performative events may help us see them as similarly «living» and in need of being actualized, as some of their more temporary counterparts.

By «stereotemporalizing» our experience, a memorial can inject temporality into a place. Sometimes, however, the place is already explicitly temporal: it exhibits a specific shape of time, although on our daily errands we might not be in a position to reflect on it. By its name, Jaar's *Rushes* emphasizes a certain conception of time that is supposedly held both by subjects depicted in the photographs – desperate fortune seekers participating in a questionable gold rush in Serra Pelada in Brazil, as well as by those who might see the photos while rushing to work in the Financial District of Manhattan. For Phillips this work is «about» time because it reconceives the temporal expectations associated with the concept of art. By using advertising displays on a subway platform, Jaar however distances himself from the concept of art and the expectations it elicits. He rather refers to time as it is experienced by commuters during

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, a statue by Skule Waksvik, located at a shopping mall owned space, called *Lady at the Dock* with an added shopping plastic bag to her hand (discussed by Bengtsen [2013]) or the *Duke of Wellington* statue by Carlo Marochetti, erected in 1844 in at Royal Exchange Square in Glasgow, whose head is since the 1980s regularly decorated by a traffic cone.

rush hour and helps us to see that this temporality, imposed by the capitalist system of which they are a part, may have disastrous consequences.

Commuting zones, such as the subway station platform that Jaar used, have now become established as an art space. It is surprising because they do not provide what has traditionally been considered ideal conditions for artwork reception: they do not sustain undisturbed, contemplative observation. The reason why they seem to be so suitable for exhibiting works of public art might have to do with the fact that these locations palpably incorporate the most obvious shape of our public time, its acceleration. Similarly to those works that are, as Willard said, «embodied meditation of the use of public space», works displayed at transport and commuting zones might seek to become embodied meditation of the use on public time.

#### IV.

In the closing part, we present an example of public art exhibited in a «speed zone», coming from our geographical region, the Czech Republic. We expect, however, that the readers may have experienced similar art locations in their own geographical contexts. In fact, the work by Alfredo Jaar referred to above, might fit into the setting quite well.

The ArtWall is an open-air contemporary art gallery situated alongside one of the busiest speed roads in Prague's city center. The gallery consists of seven large panels placed in the niches of the wall, which is located at the foot of a hill called «Letná». As a gallery of public art, the ArtWall was established in 2005<sup>19</sup>. Since 2013, Lenka

<sup>19</sup> The gallery was closed in 2008 and reopened in 2011. Its closing, or rather withdrawing from the lease contract by the City of Prague Municipality, was accompanied by a public scandal. At the time, the gallery exhibited a project by Guma Guar, a group of Czech artists, named «Collective Identity». The project was a criticism of the municipal advertising campaign for hosting the Olympic Games in Prague. «Collective Identity» offered a satirical commentary on the campaign by exhibiting photos of the Czech financiers, who gained their property by

Kukurová and Zuzana Štefková have worked as the ArtWall principal curators. The artists' projects exhibited in the seven panels are selected by the curators based on how they fit the ArtWall's mission criteria, i.e., primarily their potential to address and express important social and political issues. In an interview, the curators emphasized that they seek to present works that manage to balance somewhat direct visual impact, partly dictated by the unusual viewing conditions, and communication of complicated political and/or social issues<sup>20</sup>. Each exhibition takes approximately two months.

The spatio-temporal context of the ArtWall location is worth pausing at. At the top of the hill, there used to tower a controversial Stalin monument, at the time the world's largest representation of Stalin<sup>21</sup>. It was erected in 1955 and meant to endure «for eternity», but was destroyed seven years after its unveiling<sup>22</sup>. After 1989, the year of the Velvet Revolution ending communist rule in the country, the empty pedestal was reappropriated by a huge kinetic sculpture created by Vratislav Karel Novák and titled *Time Machine* by the artist<sup>23</sup>. The sculpture was originally designed as

illegal means and via political connections, and were in many cases accused, accompanied with the official motto «We are all in the national team». As the current curators claim, this is a rare case of political censorship of art after the year 1989.

<sup>20</sup> The interview with Lenka Kukurová and Zuzana Štefková, made for this paper, took place online in June 2021. The authors would like to thank the curators for making themselves available.

<sup>21</sup> The statue was made by a Czech sculptor Otakar Svec (1892 – 1955). It was a group statue representing a giant Stalin followed by a cohort of slightly smaller, Soviet and Czechoslovak citizens.

<sup>22</sup> A competition for the monument was announced in 1949, but construction of the colossal statue was finished no sooner than in 1955. Its inauguration two years after Stalin's death, in the period later labeled as de-Stalinization, was ill-timed. For an intricate narrative related to the statue's construction, demolition, and its aftermath, see Pichova (2008).

<sup>23</sup> *Stroj času* (Time Machine) by Vratislav K. Novák (1942-2014) is better known as «The Metronome». For more information regarding the kinetic sculpture



a temporary work created for the Czechoslovak General Exhibition in 1991 but it has not been taken down to date. Interestingly, these two works occupying the same location at different times, provide fitting examples of an *accidentally* temporary work of public art on the one hand and *accidentally* permanent work on the other. Moreover, both works are «about» time, but not in terms of their being permanent or temporary, but rather by means of their emphasized monumentalism and by being a representation of a metronome<sup>24</sup>, respectively.

The gallery focuses on generally avoided, globally resonant issues, such as questions of feminism, LGBTQ, racism, homophobia, homelessness, sexual violence, xenophobia, or arms trade, as well as some Czech-specific topics, such as controversial parts of the national history. For example, in the 2013 exhibition «The Art of Killing»<sup>25</sup> Lukáš Houdek reflected on the topic of the violence committed by Czech people on German inhabitants after the Second World War. Houdek created a series of black and white photos of Barbie and Ken dolls depicting re-enactments of real events of displacement of Czech Germans taking place at the borders of post-war Czechoslovakia. The images are highly disturbing, not only due to the level of violence displayed, but also by the eerie and uncomfortable feeling caused by the empty faces and the smiles of the dolls. To this day, Czech public opinion has not been united on the topic, nor reconciled with the historical events,

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and its location, see <https://praguepeacetrail.org/time-machine-instead-of-stalin>. For more information about the artist, see <https://www.artlist.cz/en/vratislav-karel-novak-100875/>.

<sup>24</sup> «Despite the high winds and financial problems that occasionally cause it to miss a beat, the metronome's steady ticking calls attention to the inevitability of time's passage, as well as to the city's musical history» (Píchová [2008]: 615)

<sup>25</sup> The exhibition was held simultaneously in the National Technical Library and at the ArtWall. For more information on the exhibition as well as the artist, see press release at [https://www.artwallgallery.cz/sites/default/files/exhibition/downloads/2019-07/PR\\_houdek\\_eng.pdf](https://www.artwallgallery.cz/sites/default/files/exhibition/downloads/2019-07/PR_houdek_eng.pdf) and the artist's website at <https://www.houdeklukas.com/killing>.

despite this topic gaining more attention lately in other artworks<sup>26</sup>. Houdek's exhibition provoked considerable discussion in the media in the Czech Republic and beyond, as well as directly in the public<sup>27</sup>.

Houdek's exhibition is described here as an example of the gallery's artistic focus on politically and socially engaging public art; in the paper, we are interested in the relation between artistic projects of this kind (and not in any specific exhibition) and the venue they are presented at. Let us now elaborate on the venue's features. Since ArtWall is not a gallery one has to go to deliberately, but usually passes by on daily errands, literally anyone can see the artworks, even those people who usually would not go to a gallery, especially not a gallery of contemporary art. The ArtWall thus at least partially avoids the problem of «preaching to the saved», i.e., opening potentially controversial or problematic topics to typical recipients of contemporary art who are already aware of the issue in question. Moreover, as the curators of the wall emphasized in the interview, the viewer's experience is not to be exhausted by the actual exposure to the works installed in the space of those seven wall niches; they expect view-

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<sup>26</sup> A theatre play *An Eyewitness* (Očítý svědek, dir. Jiří Havelka), which premiered recently on an «online stage» of the Czech National Theatre, is based on real events from 1945 when more than two hundred civilians, including women and children, were murdered. Another example may be the recent film by a Czech director Bohdan Sláma *Shadow Country* (Krajina ve stínu, 2020), which also deals with the aggression of Czech people towards German neighbors at the end of the Second World War.

<sup>27</sup> Lukáš Houdek said that, while the exhibition was on, he received emails from the public daily. «Some of them were upset, outraged, even mad. I was called a national traitor; some authors have even desired my death. I decided that I would answer each of them, but discussion was unfortunately only possible in some cases. There were positive reactions as well, a huge support for me». The author's words are quoted in Magdalena Wagner: *Verschwommene Vergangenheit Ein Fotoprojekt über die Vertreibung der Sudetendeutschen*. *JÁDU*, February 2014, <https://www.goethe.de/ins/cz/prj/jug/kul/de12369331.htm>.

ers to go beyond the works' display, seek further information and join the events and discussion held in the neighborhood or online.

This feature is characteristic for a new genre public art; as Suzanne Lacy noticed, its expected manner of reception is «conversation rather than visual experience» (Lacy [2010]: 22). We believe, however, that – in addition to exhibiting «conversational» artworks – the ArtWall exemplifies this characteristic by its unusually restrictive viewing conditions, and thus increases not only their political but also their aesthetic impact. Most of the public sees the works exhibited on the ArtWall while commuting to and from work; as one of the curators said: «The tram number 17 is the best one to take, if you want to see our exhibition». The hostility to prolonged contemplation, that the location embodies, a constant move in one or the other direction, and short but repeated, usually twice-a-day exposures to the works, inspire a more inquisitive look with an erotetic structure<sup>28</sup> and provoke an active search for information beyond the actual placement of the exhibition. The display of politically engaged, provocative works under these unstable, accelerated conditions seems to us aesthetically successful because the challenge these works pose by their often destabilizing message is mirrored in the missing viewpoint this open-air gallery features.

The temporal features of the gallery's location at the «ticking» hill of Letná, crowned by the kinetic Metronome sculpture and surrounded by a constant movement of means of transport provide suitable aesthetic counterparts to the political artworks of the present day. Without the aspect of temporality, the effect of artworks at ArtWall gallery and their social impact could not be fully explained. It is present in the aspect of their being perceived in glimpses and quick succession, in the aspect of bringing forward (generally avoided and unmoving) social or political issues, and in the aspect of emphasizing the changing forms of time construction we connect with the issues presented

by the exhibited artworks. It may help us to realize that while our time seems to be moving forward quickly and aimfully, there are groups of people and sets of problems for which time has a different pace, texture, and shape.

## V.

In this article, we have argued that public art focuses on meditating on public features of our lives, primarily in terms of their places and times. We have criticized the tendency to put a sole emphasis on the relation between public art and public space. As other scholars, we have noted that a temporal dimension of works of public art has been made prominent recently, we but have nevertheless rejected that it is reducible to works' being temporary (or ephemeral). We have also argued against using these two characteristics as standard features of two different artforms, such as «street art» and «public art», respectively. To flesh out the idea of public art as meditating on public time, we speculated on temporal features of art exhibitions taking place at commuting zones. We have suggested that the art spaces that occupy commuting zones, such as the ArtWall gallery in Prague, may be aesthetically effective, partly due to their embeddedness in the environment that wears seemingly universally shared public time of our society on its sleeve. We have speculated that a temporally specific environment, such as this one, may become a part of the meaning of those works that seek to compare and contrast the accelerated, progressive public time with the unmoving or decelerating pace of those issues and subjects occupying less prominent political and social areas.

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<sup>28</sup> We are using the term that Noël Carroll discusses in the context of narrative. See, for example, Carroll (2007).

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