

STUDIE/ARTICLES

“SHARED RESPONSIBILITY” AS A NEW FORM OF COLLECTING AND CARING: THE EXAMPLE OF AN ONLINE MUSEUM FOR THE PUBLIC ART IN THE CITY OF ATHENS

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ABSTRACT/ ABSTRAKT:

The city of Athens is often called an open-air museum. Not just because of the ancient ruins preserved and interpreted in many parts of the city, but also because of the large number of sculptures that have been decorating streets and squares, since it became the capital of the new Greek state in the 1830s. Since then, more statues were added with various symbolic meanings and of varying artistic merit. Nevertheless, there seems to be limited appreciation of either their symbolism or their aesthetic value. Vandalism has been a rather common phenomenon, especially in the centre of the city; it is often considered to be related to the personalities depicted and their symbolic value or to the location of the sculpture in the public space. Others believe that the statues receive citizen's anger, often despair, indiscriminately Why do people decide to vandalise works of art in public spaces and what is the role of museums in making them interested in public art and respectful of it?

In 2014 a small group of people (about 22), who belong to the *atenistas* group – i.e. a citizens' organization that aim to “do something for their city” (<http://atenistas.org>) – relied on a publication by art historian Zetta Antonopoulou and created a website exhibition (www.athenssculptures.com), which presents, interprets and locates on a city map approximately 300 sculptures in the city of Athens. Is this website a new, bottom-up approach, to a museum? Is this website a “museum without walls” that records an “art collection without walls”? And what is the role of the public in such an effort? Are we in front of new forms of collecting and of “museum making”? Is this effort by *atenistas* a new approach to participative “collecting”? Will shared responsibility make protection and caring for these statues easier or even possible?

This paper aims to discuss these issues and argue for shared responsibility as a new form of collecting and caring.

„Sdílená odpovědnost“ jako nová forma sběratelství a péče o sbírky na příkladu online muzea veřejného umění v Athénách

Městu Athény se často přezdívá i muzeum pod širým nebem, a to nejen kvůli zdejšímu antickému památkám, zachovaným a prezentovaným v různých částech města, ale i díky velkému množství soch, jež zdobí ulice a náměstí od 30. let 19. století, kdy se Athény staly hlavním městem moderního řeckého státu. Od té doby zde přibýly další sochy různého symbolického významu i umělecké úrovně. Zdá se však, že jejich symbolika či este-

tická hodnota nebývají vždy v plné míře doceňovány. Poměrně běžným jevem, zejména v centru města, je vandalizmus, který se často váže k zobrazovaným osobnostem či k místu osazení dané skulptury ve veřejném prostoru. Podle jiného názoru se však sochy stávají terčem hněvu či nenávisti občanů zcela náhodně... Proč lidé poškozují umělecká díla na veřejných prostranstvích a co dělají muzea pro to, aby v nich vzbudila zájem o veřejné umění a respekt k němu?

V roce 2014 malá skupina lidí (přibližně 22) hlásících se k tzv. *atenistům* – tj. sdružení občanů, jež se snaží „udělat něco pro svoje město“ (<http://atenistas.org>) – na základě publikace historičky umění Zetty Antonopoulou vytvořila online výstavu (www.athenssculptures.com), která prezentuje a interpretuje přibližně 300 soch v rámci Athén a udává jejich polohu na mapě města. Představuje tato stránka nový, progresivní přístup k muzejní prezentaci? Je tato stránka tzv. muzeem beze zdí, které eviduje „otevřenou uměleckou sbírku“? A jakou roli v tomto úsilí sehrává veřejnost? Máme co do činění s novou formou sbírkotvorné činnosti a muzejnictví? Znamená toto úsilí *atenistů* nový přístup k sbírkotvorné činnosti za spoluúčasti veřejnosti? Může sdílená odpovědnost zjednodušit nebo dokonce umožnit ochranu a péči o tyto sochy?

Tento příspěvek se věnuje diskusi o zmíněných otázkách a snaží se argumentovat ve prospěch sdílené odpovědnosti jako nové formy sbírkotvorné činnosti a památkové péče.

KEY WORDS/KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

participative collecting – shared responsibility – online museum – Athens – sculpture
participativní sběratelství – sdílená odpovědnost – online muzeum – Athény – skulptura

1. INTRODUCTION

The city of Athens is often called an open-air museum. Not just because of the ancient ruins preserved and interpreted in many parts of the city, but also because of the large number of sculptures that have been decorating streets and squares, since it became the capital of the new Greek state in the 1830s. The primary scope these statues were intended to serve was to celebrate the heroes of the Greek revolution, the philhellenes and donors that helped towards the construction of the new state, as well as to memorialize those that died in the fields of battle. Since then, more statues were added with various symbolic meanings and of varying artistic merit.¹

Nevertheless, there seems to be limited appreciation of both their symbolism and their aesthetic value. Vandalism, and often theft, have been rather common phenomena, especially in the center of the city (Figure 1). For instance, on June 9th 2016, the mayor of the city, Yiorgos Kaminis, announced that 49 bronze statues will be withdrawn from the public spaces of the capital and will be replaced by copies, in order to be protected

from theft and vandalism. This was the result of a theft that had taken place a few nights before, when three bronze busts of three well-known Greek writers were stolen from the square in front of the Municipal Cultural Centre, right in the middle of the city, possibly to end up to a smelting furnace. The mayor claimed that “*it is with great concern that we see phenomena of vandalism and delinquency in areas and neighborhoods of the capital, that threaten [the phenomena] and undermine our efforts towards the reconstruction and recovery of Athens.*”² This has been the last in a series of similar incidents that take place quite regularly. The phenomenon is often considered to be related to the public appreciation, or rather the lack of it, of the personalities depicted or the symbols these sculptures are meant to stand for; in some other cases, it is the location of the sculpture which is held responsible for provoking or allowing for disrespectful phenomena. Others



Figure 1: The sculpture of the “national” poet Kostis Palamas is located in the public garden in front of the Municipal Cultural Centre of Athens and is often vandalized (Photo: A. Bounia, 1/4/2017).

² G. Kaminis: 49 works of art are removed from of Athens due to vandalism. In *CNN Greece* [online]. 9/6/2016 [cit. 2017-09-08]. Available from www: <<http://www.cnn.gr/news/ellada/story/35202/g-kaminis-aposyrontai-49-glypta-apo-tin-athina-gia-logoy-prostasias-apo-vandalismoys?v5>>. (in Greek).

¹ ANTONOPOULOU, Zeta. *The Sculpture of Athens. Open Air Sculpture 1834–2004*. Athens: Potamos Publications, 2003. (in Greek).

believe that the statues receive citizens’ anger, often despair indiscriminately, as a result of people’s political and economic anxieties ... In some other cases, like this last one, lack of education and poverty are identified as major – although not pardonable – causes.

In this article, I will neither go in depth into the analysis of the reasons people decide to vandalize works of art in public spaces, nor will I attempt to suggest one way of solving this problem. But, using as a case-study an online exhibition/database that has been set up by a volunteers’ group, I will argue that respect and care for public art cannot be achieved unless truly participative strategies of collecting and caring will develop. I will further argue that “shared responsibility” is, or could be, one more form of participation in culture that might offer new possibilities and new potentials for cultural institutions and contemporary collecting – as well as one way forward as far as phenomena such as vandalism, disrespect, indifference regarding public art are concerned.

2. PUBLIC DISPLAY OF ART

The display of art in public spaces without guards, restrictions or limitations usually associated with institutional practices challenges, questions and undermines the traditional distance between artworks and their beholders in terms of access, meaning-making, acceptance and even appropriation. A work of art exhibited in a public space becomes more vulnerable; the weather, the natural tear and wear, but also the unmediated interaction with the spectator – that ranges from creative appropriation to vandalism – have a deep impact on the work of art. Ideas that are usually associated with art and cultural institutions, such as

permanence, stability, resilience in time, and even authority are challenged, along with the notions of ownership and belonging. The display of art in public spaces is in fact a potential political action, since it creates the public space, it calls for a common belonging and appreciation of similar values and ideals, it invites citizens to a community of belonging and a re-imagining of the urban space as a hybrid, evolving space of co-existence, co-articulation of human stories and identities. This whole process is based on “trust”, a common value that is activated by the act of placing sculpture and other artworks in the public space. It is because of this “trust”, and all that it entails in terms of it setting the foundations of society, that destruction and vandalism of artworks in public spaces energizes a deeply felt fear and signifies a deep crisis in societal values and the bonds that keep a society together.³ On the other hand, the “attack” to such symbols of community identity, is only a logical consequence when members of the community feel that these decisions, these values, these efforts are made without them, in other words they are invited to a dialogue that they have no control of, no interest in, or wish to participate to.

In 2008 two researchers from the National Technical University of Athens conducted a small research in order to identify the relationship of Athenians with the public art in their city.⁴ The majority of participants in this research claimed that they do not understand the symbolisms of the existing sculpture and all of them

³ KENANIDOU, Maria. Contemporary art and public space. *Intellectum*, 2008, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 35–40. (in Greek).

⁴ *The sculpture in the public square: the example of the public squares in Athens* [online]. Athens: National Technical University of Athens [cit. 2017-06-05]. Available from www: <http://courses.arch.ntua.gr/fsr/124033/2_dialeksi_doc_bbFINAL.pdf>. (in Greek).

answered that they need more information about them, about the artists, about the works, about the reasons they are there. Half of those asked claimed that they would like to have a saying in the process of commissioning, selecting and positioning of artworks in the public space and that this is only reasonable since the public space belongs to them, too. The other half of those asked were willing to accept their exclusion from the processes mainly based on their lack of expertise: some argued that expert committees or artists should be responsible for such issues, whereas others claimed that they have not enough expertise to have a saying. In other words, they excluded themselves from being stakeholders in this public matter, having been persuaded that “art is not for them”, “art is only for the experts”.

Some of the questions revealed interesting insights about museums, as well: a few of the respondents argued that statues are meant to be only in museums, whereas the majority of those asked whether statues and other artworks should remain forever in a public space, after they were located there, replied negatively arguing that the public space is and should be continuously evolving and changing and therefore works of art should stay there just for a short period of time and then they should be put in a museum, to be replaced in the public space by other artworks, other expressions of thoughts and ideas that would follow the current trends. The role of museums seems rather depressing when looked at through the lenses of this research: they are not a public space, in the sense of being evolving, constantly changing and reflecting society; rather they are the repository of artworks once they have fulfilled their active role in the city, they are well-respected information providers, but rather static,

authoritative and alienating. Museums appear to be not an extension of the public space, not an alternative public space, but a storage area, a place to provide passive protection, a shelter.

If there is one common theme, one common thread, that seems to run through the answers by all participants, this is the lack of involvement, the lack of responsibility and, therefore, of interest. Either because they have been persuaded that they are not educated enough or in the appropriate field, or because they are simply not asked, the Athenians who took part in this research expressed the view that there is indeed “distance” between themselves and the art in the public space. Is this indifference – or lack of shared responsibility – that can be used to explain how it was possible for an extremely difficult in technical terms removal of heavy bronze busts to have taken place right in the middle of the city without anyone reporting anything, so many times in the past?

3. THE ONLINE MUSEUM CREATED BY THE ATENISTAS

The crisis, both economic and social, that has defined Greece internally and externally since 2008, more or less, has had a very important, positive impact in allowing for solidarity to flourish among citizens, encouraging bottom-up initiatives and creating stronger links among individuals and groups. New forms of social engagement were forged, and mutual understanding was also elicited.⁵ One such initiative has been the *atenistas* group, i.e. an “*open community of citizens of Athens, who love their city and think that it is not a ‘finished story’, but a terrain for innovative and effective*

⁵ RAKOPOULOS, Theodoros. Solidarity: the egalitarian tensions of a bridge-concept. *Social Anthropology*, 2016, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 142–151.

*actions that will make us realize the possibilities of improvement and promotion of our city.*⁶ The *atenistas* are citizens of Athens who have decided to “do something for their city”, but also to enjoy their city and to share with others ways of enjoying Athens. They have been active on many levels, and their activities range from organizing walks in various neighborhoods to inviting people to explore the small museums of Athens, to collecting food and clothes for the refugee shelters in the city.

In 2014 a small group of people (around 22), who belong to the *atenistas* decided to create a website exhibition,⁷ which presents, organizes, classifies, interprets and locates on a city map 320 sculptures. According to the coordinator of the group, Ms. Eleni Grammenou, they “wanted to create a kind of online museum”, but also to express their own interests, not only in sculpture and public art but also in artistic creation, since the volunteers were involved because they enjoy photography, graphic design, or they are simply interested in exploring the public spaces of their city.

In other words, their aim was this website to become a “museum without walls”, a museum for which they would create an “art collection without walls”, allowing for “more than the sum of its parts” (to remember the traditional definition of collecting by Susan Pearce, 1992⁸), i.e. for personal expression, a meta-level of collecting that has to do with the photographs currently forming

6 *Atenistas* [online]. [cit. 2017-06-04]. Available from www: <<https://atenistas.org/>>.

7 *Athens Sculptures Atenistas* [online]. [cit. 2017-06-04]. Available from www: <<http://www.athenssculptures.com/>>.

8 PEARCE, Susan M. *Museums, Objects and Collections*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

the archive of the website and the information regarding the artifacts, and, most importantly, a shared sense of responsibility, a view that you do not need to be an expert in order to care for the sculpture, you just need to care enough and to be prepared to share this responsibility.

The site invites more participants and the group is more than welcoming and accommodating.

It is my argument here that this initiative brings forward two main issues regarding museums and museology, but also collecting: the transformation of public, but also of institutional space due to the impact of new technologies on the one hand, the forms and models of public participation on the other. It is to these two that I will now turn my attention.

4. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE INSTITUTIONAL SPACE

In the contemporary digital world, the public space has faced a most crucial transformation. New media have overturned traditional social cohesion mechanisms and traditional communication technologies within the urban space, meaning that the public space as a center of social life has been languished and replaced by new communication platforms. The urban squares have been transformed into virtual squares, forums and chatrooms. Everybody can socialize with everybody within this limitless virtual space that changes both the personal and the communal understanding of the self.

Within this framework, museums, as categories of public space, seem to take different forms as they move from the real world into this new space created online. In these online spaces new possibilities are opened for the institutions to re-

invent themselves, to encourage new forms of engagement, to empower citizens to become actively involved in collecting their own objects and create their own stories. Museum professionals have the opportunity to locate museums in this networked, dispersed and distributed space that the internet provides as one of the primary nodes,⁹ but they also have the opportunity to train citizens in the production of personal and democratic online museums, which would “realize deep benefits from the soft architecture of the museum without experiencing the shortcomings of institutionalization.”¹⁰ This, of course, does not mean that exclusions are not present in the new forms of cultural interaction. Access to the digital public space is also depended on parameters such as age, ability to cope with the new, access to digital apparatuses and so on. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that it allows for a re-negotiation of power relations and invites a re-distribution of institutional power, in this case of the power of the museum.¹¹

The decision by the *atenistas* to create an online public space, an online “museum”, in order to engage citizens in actually looking at the statues in their neighborhood, using their special knowledge and/or skills, which might be art related or not, relevant in a traditional art historical way

9 BAUTISTA, Susana and Anne BALSAMO. Understanding the distributed museum: mapping the spaces of museology in contemporary culture. In TRANT, Jennifer and David BEARMAN (eds.). *Museums and the Web 2011: Proceedings* [online]. Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, 2011 [cit. 2017-06-04]. Available from www: <https://www.museumstheweb.com/mw2011/papers/understanding_the_distributed_museum_mapping_t.html>.

10 *National Museums Making Histories in a Diverse Europe. EuNaMus Report No. 7* [online]. Linköping: University of Linköping Electronic Press, 2012, p. 4 [cit. 2017-06-04]. Available from www: <<http://liu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?searchid=2&pid=diva2:573632>>.

11 BISTI, Marianna. *Public Space Users are Needed ...* Athens: National Technical University of Athens, 2012, p. 49. Thesis.

or not, to record them, to “collect” them in this platform points towards a new form of collecting – information, knowledge, skills and people, not just artifacts – and a new form of meaning-making. The real public space is re-visited in order to collect its artifacts into a virtual public space that would then allow for a re-appraisal of the real public space to take place.

Nina Simon’s much quoted typology of participation has interestingly derived from a report on “citizens’ science”, i.e. participation of non-professionals in scientific research, in other words an invitation not just to share knowledge and understanding, views and ideas about the end results, about the facts or about the cultural products, but also about processes, about inquiries, observations, analyses, development of research methodologies and so on.¹² Taking part in the scientific process, the report (and Simon) argues, especially if this has an immediate relation to oneself, for instance, it refers to local things, increases interest in sharing information, in engaging people, in participating. Nina Simon further argues that there are four (4) models of participation in the work of cultural institutions: contribution, collaboration, co-creation and hosting.

Brown,¹³ a few years before, has argued from a different perspective that there are five modes of arts participation, distinguished according to the degree of

involvement and creative control of individuals:

i) Inventive Arts Participation engages the mind, body and spirit in an act of artistic creation that is unique and idiosyncratic, regardless of skill level.

ii) Interpretive Arts Participation is a creative act of self-expression that brings alive and adds value to pre-existing works of art, either individually or collaboratively.

iii) Curatorial Arts Participation is the creative act of purposefully selecting, organizing and collecting art to the satisfaction of one’s own artistic sensibility.

iv) Observational Arts Participation encompasses arts experiences that an individual selects or consents to, motivated by some expectation of value.

v) Ambient Arts Participation involves experiencing art, consciously or subconsciously, that is not purposefully selected – art that ‘happens to you.’”

This model is based on the argument that there are eight value clusters that are associated to the participation in the arts and provide value and meaning for those involved. These include cognitive, aesthetic, physical, spiritual, emotional, political, and sociocultural values, as well as identity formation values, such as confidence, self esteem and so on. According to the combination of these values involved in the appreciation of the arts, the author of this report argues that it is possible for cultural organizations to categorise the arts activities they offer as well as to design them, so that they satisfy certain needs. Inventive Arts Participation, for instance, refers to a set of values that include physical, political, emotional and socio-cultural ones,

encouraged when art events like dancing, take place by individuals in public spaces, whereas Ambient Arts Participation may refer to transformative experiences with aesthetic value that are blend in contemporary experiences of living in a public space, such as decorative sitting benches or enjoying the human sculpture performances in the city.¹⁴

Despite their differences – Simon focuses on participation in terms of bringing the visitors in the institution and engaging them into the institutional work, distinguishes different levels of such involvement and encourages a change of philosophy on behalf of the institutions, whereas Brown focuses on the values that different forms of participation bring forward and encourages institutions to use the suggested model in order to create more relevant work – it is my view that they are both sharing the deeply felt belief that participation is a key idea for all cultural institutions if they wish to serve their purpose and maintain their relevance to society. Furthermore, I would like to argue that the case-study of the *atenistas* is a very good example of how this process of participation works: the volunteers working together, sharing museum processes, methodologies, approaches had the opportunity not just to contribute, to collaborate, co-create or prepare an event to be hosted by an institution, but they developed a mechanism of caring and sharing, that has created a community not of volunteers alone, but of people co-responsible for the work at hand. In other words, I would like to add one more model to the ones already offered, i.e. that of sharing responsibility, of Arts Participation

12 CAISE (Center for Advancement of Informal Science Education). *Public Participation in Scientific Research: Defining the Field and Assessing its Potential for Informal Science Education*. Washington D.C. 2009; SIMON, Nina. *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010; MENSCH, Peter van and Léontine MEIJER-VAN MENSCH. *New Trends in Museology*. Celje: Muzej novejšje zgodovine, 2012.

13 BROWN, Alan S. *The Values Study: Rediscovering the Meaning and Value of Arts Participation* [online]. Hartford, CT: Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism, 2004, p. 12 [cit. 2017-06-05]. Available from [www: <http://wolfbrown.com/images/books_reports/documents/ValuesStudyReportComplete.pdf>](http://wolfbrown.com/images/books_reports/documents/ValuesStudyReportComplete.pdf).

14 BROWN, Alan S. (2004). *The Values Study: Rediscovering the Meaning and Value of Arts Participation* [online]. Hartford, CT: Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism, 2004, pp. 17–21 [cit. 2017-06-05]. Available from [www: <http://wolfbrown.com/images/books_reports/documents/ValuesStudyReportComplete.pdf>](http://wolfbrown.com/images/books_reports/documents/ValuesStudyReportComplete.pdf).

as Sharing and to argue that by taking this initiative the atenistas have taken a step forward into creating a social mechanism that could help in caring about the public art in Athens, as well as into understanding museums and other cultural institutions more than in the past.

In other words, the feeling of shared responsibility for the cultural resources, whether these are located inside a museum or in the public space is a form of participation in the arts and culture that asks cultural institutions, that are in charge of caring for cultural artifacts, to take a step back and to allow for a step forward to be made by the audience; to allow people not just to collaborate, co-create, contribute or offer for hosting, but to make them co-responsible for their work, share their ownership, their power. On the other hand, the values involved in such an extended form of sharing are multiple, and go beyond the Curatorial Arts Participation model offered, since it takes the value making mechanism from the level of the individual to the level of the group and of the community in the broader sense of the term. Arts Participation as Sharing is as much about the institution's relation to its audience as about community making. It is not just about selecting, collecting and organizing art, it is about feeling the responsibility and the ownership of such a process in a collective, communal way.

5. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the website created by the atenistas aims to restore the didactic value of the public art in the city of Athens, to encourage personal and community interaction with it, to employ different skills and views in order to create a sense of “shared responsibility”

regarding these works of art. Their collective involvement in all stages of “museum work”, from “collecting” the sculpture they locate in different parts of the city, to documenting, organizing, classifying, exhibiting them, but also using them to educate themselves and their fellow-citizens reaches at the heart of what participative collecting is and means both in scientific and cultural environments. The establishment of an “ideal”, “participative”, online “museum” of the city sculpture aims to create a more open, fluid, collaborative virtual space that poses many challenges for the real space and the real museums. Its aims to make protection and caring for these artworks a more shared responsibility than it is now, to make people realize not because they are told, but because they find out in the process, that they have a stake in what happens in the city, in their lives, in their world. It is a mechanism of empowerment that can provide useful paradigms for real museums to follow, but also it can help people understand real museum work and change their views about institutions and their role. It is all a matter of collaboration...

This article does not claim that this is enough and that the phenomenon of vandalism, this deeply disturbing breach of “trust” regarding the public space and the role of art in it, will stop because of initiatives such as this one. What it is claimed, though, is that initiatives such as the one by the atenistas can become a model of co-caring, of sharing, that could lead to a different approach to culture in the public realm.

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