

## The SPACES Conference

*“Critical art is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.” (Chantal Mouffe, 2008)*

Art that reacts to life where it actually happens, blurred borders between the producer and the viewer of art: these were two of the themes explored by the SPACES project, which from 2011 to 2014 assembled artists and cultural workers in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine who are acting in the public realm of their cities, critically reflecting on societal issues. Artistic work expressed in the temporary use of public space establishes a counterweight to the eternal representation of power that classical statues and monuments are loaded with, or it can represent the artist’s tactics of sustaining creativity in unfavourable conditions.

*“In a society situation where use of public spaces becomes more and more a matter of interest and choice, the quality of the spaces becomes a crucial factor for the death or life of modern cities” (Gehl, 2010)*

Public space is a radically changing, endangered environment, particularly in Eastern Europe. After decades of rather hidden and scattered struggles, public space and its re-appropriation through artists in particular, and civil society in general, have become key elements in current processes of protest, activism and change.

Within the framework of SPACES, the curatorial team invited artists to develop interactive projects in Chisinau, Kyiv, Tbilisi and Yerevan and to reconsider public space as a place for free expression, social encounters and shared responsibilities while aiming at enhancing civil society processes. The SPACES interventions dealt with the past, present and future aspirations of spaces and cities. They succeeded in changing the rhythm of the city, making private acts public and provoking – all against the backdrop of the burning question of: What can citizens do to get actively involved in current political discourses?

Another challenge for SPACES was to strengthen the cultural public sphere in the four countries and to juxtapose it with an economy-centred cultural policy approach. The strategy of a cultural public sphere brings together the *“notion of public debate, democratic representation in terms of politics and policy, with aesthetics and emotion, that is, affective matters”* (McGuigan, 2011), thus going beyond cognition.

The project created antitheses to the current urban transformation processes characterized by the privatization of public property, the destruction of historic city centres of the cities and an ongoing loss of their former social functions and new ownership patterns and symbolic domination of the public space by political and religious groups in power. These processes exclude many voices, such as religious minorities, economically disadvantaged groups, or the communities of sexual minorities, and leave citizens unprepared to consider public space as a common space for all.

*“The view [...] is of space-time as a configuration of social relations within which the specifically spatial may be conceived of as an inherently dynamic simultaneity. Moreover, since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification.” (Massey, Space, Place and Gender, 3)*

The SPACES conference in Vienna presents and discusses experiences from Chisinau, Kyiv, Tbilisi and Yerevan and connects them to other parts of Europe and the world. Speakers from 12 countries share their experiences and reflections with the audience. Discussions focus on looking at the social transformation processes in Europe and the positioning of artists in current global processes of protest, activism and change.

**[www.spacesproject.net](http://www.spacesproject.net)**

**References:**

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