

Milica Pekić and Ana Adamović

Kiosk collective, Belgrade

ART AND PUBLIC SPACE IN THE „CITY“ THE VISUAL PROGRAM OF THE BELGRADE SUMMER ART FESTIVAL (BELEF) 2008 AND 2009 A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: *This essay reflects the process of designing the visual arts program of the Belgrade Summer Art Festival (Belef) in 2008 and 2009 from the perspective of the curatorial team. In both editions, the program focused entirely on the art in public space. This essay deals with the wider context that influenced program orientation; it gives an overview of the program's participants and programs. It also offers an analysis of the production conditions of the festival. Finally, with the benefit of 15 years' hindsight, we will analyze the relationship between our aspirations at the time and the program's impact.*

Key words: *public art, street art, graffiti, murals, workshops*



Figure 1: Terratoria, Belef 08 (photo: Ana Adamović)

After more than fifteen years since the realization of the Belgrade Summer Art festival in 2008 and 2009, the thematic issue of *Kultura* magazine dedicated to street art and art in public space is a good occasion for reflection and a first-hand insight into the motivations, concept, realization and production of the festival's program. From the perspective of coordinators of the visual art program in 2008 and curators and co-producers of the visual program in 2009, Belef Festival seems far behind us. Our professional path has led us towards further research and experiments, and our current preoccupations in the field of contemporary art seem to be far removed from the works realized during the festival. However, even at first glance at the long-written and forgotten text from 2008,¹ we recognize several basic categories that we can easily identify with our current preoccupations. The relationship between art and public space, multi-authorship and a high degree of audience participation are stated in the first sentence as the main interests that guided us while shaping the program. Some of these topics are still important for the work of the Kiosk collective, but the field of research and platforms for experiments have shifted. Nevertheless, it is interesting to detect the changes in the approach and methodologies that have occurred in the past decade. The Belef Festival itself, as an official city manifestation, also has changed its character, structure and program conception over time.

The aim of this review will not be a historical analysis of the development of the festival as a city manifestation (although it could provide certain guidelines for future researchers). Rather, for this occasion, we will focus on our personal experience of working on the festival's program from several different perspectives. We will look at the broader context that influenced the program design and orientation towards the public space as the main platform for the realization of most program activities. We will recall some of the participants and programs realized within these two festival editions, as well as the production conditions of a city manifestation such as the Belgrade Summer Art Festival. Finally, we will try to conclude this review by analyzing the effects of the implemented program, aware that the perspective of direct participants inevitably carries the character of subjective assessments shaped by our own aspirations, beliefs and experiences.

The relationship between the social context and the program design of the festival

In 2008 Belgrade was somewhat different from today's image of the city. Investors' urbanism had not yet become the dominant force behind the changes in the structure of the city, while the effect of the global economic crisis still hadn't reached its peak which will become more apparent in the second half of the year. However, symptoms of commercial interests over public space were already clearly being manifested, from numerous abandoned spaces of privatized public companies whose hidden conversion of purpose has not yet been clear, to the proliferation of commercial marketing strategies and adverts on facades and public areas. The Museum of Contemporary Art and the National Museum of Serbia were closed to the public due to reconstruction, and the

¹ Pekić, M. and Adamović, A. (2008) *Art and the City*, unpublished text from the archive of Kiosk collective.



Figure 2: Mark Jenkins, temporary sculptural street installation, Belef 09
(photo: Ana Adamović)

attempts of the city administration to create a new space for independent culture in the old warehouse of publishing house Nolit in Kraljevića Marka Street resulted in unresolved legal status for the artists and art collectives who were using the space. The plans of the City Council for the construction of a new City Hall gallery on the Republic Square remain recorded only in the domain of certain planning documents. Accelerated commercialization, but also an institutional weakness to represent the public interest, directed the design of the program of the festival toward public art interventions and actions on the streets, squares, parks, facades, schoolyards, sports centers, rivers, the railway station, and city corners.

The choice of locations for program activities as well as the choice of participants was guided by the idea of the right to the city. The right to participate in processes of urban transformation, the right to public spaces and artistic content, but also the right of artists to be actively involved in the processes of public interest. According to David Harvey, the right to the city is “far more than a right of individual or group access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts’ desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right, since reinventing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization”.²

2 Harvey, D. (2012), *Rebel cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution*, London and Brooklyn: Verso, p. 4.

The need to intervene in the processes of urban transformations at the time as well as the need to open a dialogue about the city and its development while engaging artists in this discussion, determined the concept of the visual program. The very nature of the festival as the city's public manifestation motivated us to design the program more ambitiously than it would be possible for us as non-institutional actors, to use the advantages of institutional and infrastructural support. We wanted to include artists still on the margins of the art system but whose voices were already present in the public space through various guerilla actions, to promote the work of local artists outside the galleries in public spaces, to enable a wider international dialogue and exchange with international artists recognized for their works in public spaces, and to enable and encourage the participation of art students within the different festival's programs.

Artists, collectives, workshops, actions³



Figure 3: Alby Guillaume Remed, mural in Karađorđeva street in Belgrade, Belef 08 (photo: Ana Adamović)

One of our initial aims in designing the program was to invite the local graffiti and street art scene rapidly developing on the streets of Belgrade at the time, with already clearly profiled different styles and author's approaches. Several program units in both festival editions brought together a large number of artists around collective actions in public space. The Graffiti Jam program at two locations (panels in Kralja Petra and Uzun Mirkova streets and the courtyard of the "Sveti Sava" high school) was organized by graf-

³ Reconstruction of the festival's program relies on our own documentation available on www.kioskngo.net (last visited 30. April 2024), but also on the catalogs of the both festivals: Kolundžija, D. (editor, 2008), *Belef08*, Beograd: Belef centar; Milin, V. (2009), *Belef09*, Beograd: Belef centar.

fiti artist Bojan Stevanović and included over 30 authors of the local and regional graffiti scene in 2008. The same year a public street art session took place on Nikola Pašić square, with more than 20 street art authors taking part and creating their works live in front of an audience. Within the next festival's edition, a similar collective street art action was organized in front of the Sports Center "Olimp", in which 13 artists participated in creating works on the public wall over 30m long. This part of the program was curated and organized by the artists Stefan Unković and Dušan Rajić. In 2008, the American collective GRL (Graffiti Research Lab) performed a laser tagging action on the facade of the Youth Theater "Boško Buha" on Republic square, where citizens and the audience had the opportunity to take part in the session, creating large-format temporary light graffiti.

Apart from collective public actions by artists, our second program strategy was to initiate collaboration and exchange through numerous workshops with relevant international street art artists whom we invited as guests of the festival. In 2008, the artist Albi Guillaume known as Remed realized a workshop with local authors using the public space of a small tram tower as a playground and surface for artistic interventions. French artist Black Le Rat, one of the founders of the street art scene in Europe and among the first to introduce stencils to street art in the 1980s, was a guest of the festival in 2009. Black realized a workshop with local artists and students in the independent cultural center Magacin in Kraljevića Marka Street with a series of public interventions mainly in the courtyard area in front of Magacin itself. American artist Mark Jenkins bases his interventions in public space on temporary sculptures, human shape figures made of duct tape, which he places in various city locations, parks, crossroads, corners, creating interruptions and unexpected situations in the daily routine of the city. The implementation of Jenkins' interventions within the 2009 festival program included workshops with art students and the collective creation of sculptures, followed by the collective action of placing sculptures in the public space.

The motivation to work with students and the idea to create conditions for their wider participation in the festival's program resulted in the Teratorija program initiated and mentored by the artist Marko Lađušić. Over 200 students, in both editions of the festival, had the opportunity to work and make terracotta sculptures in the Terra art residency space in Kikinda. During the festival, their sculptures occupied the city, from the pedestrian zone in Knez Mihailova Street to schoolyards, green areas on Ada Ciganlija, kindergartens, libraries and other public locations and institutions in different parts of the city. Due to their large numbers, these terracotta interventions temporarily dominated certain areas of the city, and in 2008, during the protest organized on the occasion of the arrest of Radovan Karadžić on Republic Square, they became an obstruction to movement as well as a cold weapon of street conflicts. The media images of Belgrade that went around the world that day manifested the paradox of the intersection of street riots and art in a strange simulacrum of a public event.

The production of six large-scale murals on Belgrade facades within both festival editions turned out to be the first major initiative of this type after almost twenty years, when in 1989, on the occasion of the 9th Summit of Non-Aligned Movement in Bel-

grade, five murals were created. In the meantime, the continuity of mural production in the public space was maintained mainly at the initiative of the artist and professor of Fine Arts Faculty Čedomir Vasić.⁴ In 2008 and 2009, within both editions of the festival program, murals by the following artists were produced: Remed (Karadorđeva Street), Blu (Pop Lukina Street 6), Valerio Berruti (on the facade of the “Petar Petrović Njegoš” primary school in Resavska Street No. 61), Mariusz Waras M-City (at Durmitorska Street 16), Vladimir Perić (on the facade of the primary school “Sveti Sava” at Mekenzijeva Street 42) and Biljana Đurđević (Mileševska Street 57). Several parameters influenced the choice of the artists: we wanted to present artists active on the international street art scene (Remed, M-City, Blu) whose work influenced local artists of the younger generation. We also wished to promote in public space works of local artists whose contribution for shaping the local contemporary art scene is significant (Biljana Đurđević and Vladimir Perić) and international artist Valerio Berruti who was already active on the local scene and visited Belgrade on several occasions. Before the Belef festival those artists didn’t have a chance to produce large-format murals in public space. All the locations were carefully chosen and the selection of the final images was made in dialogue with the tenants of the buildings on whose facades the murals were made and with the administrations of primary schools in the case of Berruti and Perić.

In 2009, one program line was dedicated to the history and fragile memory of Belgrade through the research of various video and photo archives. Within the *Cybercinematography* project, authors Sonja Leboš and Manja Ristić made a collage of archival footage of the city which was then projected onto the facade of the building overlooking the park under the Terazije plateau. As a temporary visual and sound intervention in public space, the artwork confronted one possible historical perspective of the city with the current reality of the location. Project Korzo, on the other hand, offered an open-air permanent exhibition of archival photographs from several important photo collections covering the period from the second half of the 19th century to the 1940s.⁵ Photographs were printed on ceramic plates and displayed on the facades along King Peter street, which connects Belgrade’s two rivers, the Sava and the Danube.

Site specific artistic interventions were also produced within several other programs. Exhibition *Sistema Binario* (2008) brought together ten Italian artists (curated by Adriana Rispoli and Eugenio Viola) and seven local artists (curated by Saša Janjić) who created site-specific installations at the Belgrade railway station. Within the *Dazzling Words* project typographic light installations were produced and installed by the river on the facade of the former customs warehouse (now known as Beton hala). These installations were made by a team of designers and artists (Isidora Nikolić, Jana Oršolić, Vladimir Perić, Igor Oršolić i Dorijan Kolundžija).

This brief overview of some of the festival’s programs should offer an insight into our curatorial strategies. Guiding principles in designing the program were: a desire to create

4 Stojanović, S., Miletić, M. and Radovanović, M. (n.d.) Istorijat oslikavanja murala u Beogradu, 30. April 2024, <https://www.udruzenjekurs.org/radovi/istorijat-oslikavanja-murala-u-beogradu/>.

5 Collections of Zoran Trtica, the Museum of applied art, and the Jewish museum in Belgrade.

the program in public spaces available to a wide audience, a motivation to include a great number of local and international artists, to decentralize the curatorial role by including multiple curators and artists in shaping various sub-programs, to create permanent artistic interventions which would remain in the public space after the festival is finished, and to engage students as active participants in different programs.



Figure 5: Vladimir Perić, mural on the façade of the “Sveti Sava” elementary school, Mekenzijeva street, Belgrade. Belef 09
(photo: Ana Adamović)

Figure 4: Valerio Berutti, mural on the façade of the “Petar Petrović Njegoš” elementary school, Resavska street, Belgrade, Belef 09
(photo: Ana Adamović)

Conditions of production of the city festival

From today's perspective, it seems important to reflect on the conditions of work and production background of the festival. Some of the key questions are: in which circumstances the program was realized? What were the problems we encountered and how did we surpass them? What was our experience of collaboration with the festival's team and representatives of city institutions and local governments during the realization of the program, the scale of which implies coordination of different departments of local government and administration?

We believe that the economic background of every production, as well as the relationships between all people taking part in the production process are significant for the outcome of the program. Our position as external collaborators and independent authors influenced the working process and relations established. Our previous working practice was not burdened by the imposed norms or limitations which our colleagues,

working in the frame of public institutions, sometimes have to face and deal with.

At the time we were invited to join the team of the Belef festival, Kiosk had already realized a number of exhibitions and projects, in collaboration with numerous artists and collaborators. Our working experience, since our foundation in 2002, was shaped by the conditions of work within the independent scene: economic instability, project cycles, administrative burden and the endless and exhausting process of fundraising and project writing. At the time, the main source of funding for us came from international cultural foundations and several companies with developed grant-giving schemes. Available open calls for the independent sector on the level of national and local public administration could not cover the minimum needs of the artistic production and were more in the domain of symbolic support. The opportunity to work for the Belef festival offered us valuable institutional experience, including support on infrastructural, organizational, technical, promotional and operational levels as well as on the level of production. Being a public institution, Belef at the time had an annual public budget, permanent staff and office space;⁶ much more stable resources than any organization active on the independent scene could hope for.

Nevertheless, the program we designed proved to be demanding both at financial and production levels. The production of five murals in 2009, for example, exceeded the capacity of the festival's budget so we had to look for additional support. The partnerships we built in our previous initiatives and projects were key for the implementation of this segment of the program. One of those partnerships was with the Telenor Foundation as well as with numerous local governments in Serbia for the Start Up City



Figure 6: Blu, mural in Pop Lukina street in Belgrade, Belef 09
(photo: Ana Adamović)

⁶ Today the majority of city manifestations, including Belef, has been gathered under one organization called CEBEF–Belgrade Festivals Center. For more info, see: <https://www.cebef.rs/en/about-us.html> (accessed 30. April 2024).

project within which we initiated production of eleven murals across the country.⁷ The experience of negotiation and collaboration with local governments, dialog with local communities and tenants, communication with administration through official letters and requests, learning the procedures and production stages of the process of creating the murals in public space, learning about mural techniques and materials, all proved valuable for this segment of the festival's program.

As already mentioned, the first limitation we faced was related to the festival's budget which was not sufficient for the realization of the murals. The production expenses included: the preparatory construction works on five city facades, rent of scaffolding during the whole process, authors fees, production materials, assistance for the artists during the production and travel and accommodation for international artists. The list does not include the selection of locations, work on securing all necessary permits from relevant institutions, coordination between different city institutions, communication with tenants to include them in the decision-making process regarding the selection of final mural designs and images, as well as numerous side and invisible jobs needed for the venture of this scale. The production and successful realization of this part of the visual arts program depended mostly on our own resources, partnerships, knowledge and experience gained during the Start Up City project. However, the advantage of Belef's public status, relevance and visibility was key for negotiation and communication with public officials, relevant institutions and local communities. With the approval of the Telenor Foundation we reallocated part of the Kiosk's budget for the Start Up City project toward production of the murals within the festival, in the process of which significant partnerships were established with city municipalities of Stari grad, Savski Venac and Vračar. Their local administrations provided us with the necessary permits, scaffolding and construction works on the facades, all of which would have been impossible for us to secure and organize with our original available budget and resources.

Tenants of the building in Karađorđeva street, the ideal location for Remed's mural, had an opportunity to rent their side façade as a marketing space and secure a decent annual income. Convincing them instead to give permission for a mural was not an easy task. Stari Grad municipality helped with negotiation by offering to renovate the frontal façade of the building as well. This proved to be a key argument in securing the tenants' approval.

Production of murals was just one of the numerous festival's programs, so the experience and skills of Belef team played a crucial role in coordinating all the program activities, the administrative, production and organizational parts of the festival, as well as in the domain of promotion and communication of the activities with media and

⁷ The following artists created murals within the Start Up City project: Katarina Šoškić and Dušan Rajić (Kraljevo), Miloš Nušić (Leskovac), Stefan Ikonić (Loznica), Siniša Ilić (Pančevo), Miodrag Stanišić (Šabac), Marko Stojanović (Sombor), Igor Stangliczky (Subotica), Aleksandar Dimitrijević (Užice), Aleksandra Petković (Vranje), Mladen Hrvanović (Zaječar), and Ana Kraš (Zrenjanin). More info on: <https://kioskngo.net/project/start-up-city-2007-2009/> (accessed 30. April 2024).

the public. The program's focus on public space required coordination and continuous communication with numerous city institutions, but also it implied continuous risk of unstable conditions for activities, from weather changes to other unpredictable situations.⁸ Assuring the security of all participants and accurate timetable of all program activities as well as being prepared for unexpected situations and ad hoc solutions, required dedication and good collaboration of all team members.

Overall, the scale and the ambition of the program called for negotiation, flexibility and resourcefulness in realization, good communication with all participants in the process, and additional partnerships, including support of city municipalities and new sponsorships. Being part of a larger Belef team offered us a new experience that we remember today with fondness. The synergy between the knowledge and skills gained within the independent sector and the institutional experience of Belef's team proved efficient and together we managed to overcome all the challenges along the way. It is exactly this type of collaboration and partnership between civil and public sector, between the independent scene and public institutions that offers significant potential for development. Bringing together different experiences and knowledge, resources and capacities, we managed to implement a program which seemed too ambitious at the very beginning. However, continuous lack of public support for the independent scene and mismanagement of public institutions, lack of investments, reduction of institutional autonomy and general devaluation of professional standards in the cultural sphere, have made the capacities of both sectors much weaker; consequently, the potential of civil and public partnership is yet to be explored and practiced.

The effects of the visual program

Reflecting on our direct experience of work within the Belef festival from today's perspective we are inevitably faced with the unstable source of subjective memory and the lack of opportunity for us to take a break, look back and analyze the program's results and effects. Conditions of work on the independent scene in the past decade which do not allow time for the process of reflection and contemplation are surely part of the reason. Many artistic collectives and organizations have been burdened with the project logic, moving from one project to another, from one instability into another. Part of the reason lies also in institutional discontinuity conditioned by political circumstances, lack of institutional memory and lack of evaluation of institutional practices and values.

However, we are still living and working in this city, and many artworks produced for the festival are still part of the city's facades, walls, corners, and yards. Their presence made them part of the city's everyday life and symptoms of some past times. Some of the artworks are gone, while the others show clear signs of decay and the lack of care and necessary maintenance by local administrations.

⁸ For example, during city protests in 2008 a large number of terracotta sculptures were endangered and damaged, or the situation of night tagging over Blu's mural in 2009 just after the author returned to Italy, which prompted an urgent restoration while the scaffolding was still in place.

The program's focus on public space and intention to use the status of a public festival to create permanent artistic interventions in dialog with artists and communities still seems to us a logical strategy given the festival's profile. Some of the terminology we used to articulate the concept of the program (such as the city as a metropolis or the artists as stars) from today's perspective and experience sounds anachronous.⁹ However, the concept of the city as a public workshop is still relevant to us, but changed circumstances and contexts have shifted our tactics of action onto a different path. Even though the Belef festival continued with its dynamic program activity in the following years, it seems that the scope of the program itself and the possibility for larger permanent public space interventions has declined over the years. In the 2009 catalog we stated:

*The idea behind the festival's visual art program is to enable and initiate production of several permanent public artworks each year within the festival, as an artists' response to the aggressive commercialization of the public space in the city.*¹⁰

In an interview for Kvart magazine from the same year we added:

*As a public city manifestation, Belef festival should be a platform for artistic experiments and a platform that will support, promote and encourage innovative practices and new artistic projects that can hardly get any support elsewhere.*¹¹

And again we are faced with institutional weakness and the lack of strategy and cultural policy for the city. Instead of making a comparative analysis between various public space interventions produced within the Belef festival in the past fifteen years, comparing curatorial concepts and strategies and their effect on the structure of the city as well as its influence on the development of the local art scene, detecting the changes in understanding of the notion of public art, we are left with pale traces of old artworks and examples of tireless efforts mostly by of self-organized collectives and a few individuals to maintain public art practice and its development. Aggressive transformation of the city in the past decade and intensified confrontations between political elites and the independent art scene related specifically to the issue of the right to the city and the future of city development influenced the process of radicalization of artistic and cultural actions. Within the current context, any public dialog on the relation between art and urban development seems impossible. The rapid changes of circumstances we are working in have been guiding us and our numerous colleagues towards more intensive mutual collaborations, collective imagining of alternative non-institutional practices; towards creating solidarity platforms within which new forms of collective actions are

9 Adamović, A. and Pekić, M. (2009) Vizuelni program beogradskog letnjeg festivala Belef 09, *Belef09*, Beograd: Belef centar, p. 51.

10 Ibid.

11 David, M. (2009) Belef, *Kvart*, br. 11/12, Beograd: Kvartovi d.o.o., p. 120.

being shaped and new joint struggles for the commons and public space are being initiated.

In the context of ever-shifting circumstances, our Belef experience has remained suppressed by accumulated events in the deep corner of our memory. Even though this brief reflection is based on direct experience and rather subjective analysis, we hope it can offer insight for future researchers. This essay is dedicated to them and future efforts to evaluate and offer a more objective interpretation of the results and effects of the festival's program.



Figure 7: Korzo, Belef 09 (foto: Ana Adamović)

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Милица Пекић и Ана Адамовић

Киоск колектив, Београд

УМЕТНОСТ И ЈАВНИ ПРОСТОР ГРАДА:
ВИЗУЕЛНИ ПРОГРАМА ФЕСТИВАЛА БЕЛЕФ 2008. И 2009. ГОДИНЕ
СТУДИЈА СЛУЧАЈА

Сажетак: У тексту је представљено директно искуство рада на визуелном програму фестивала *Белеф* 2008. и 2009. године из перспективе дела ауторског тима. Фестивал је у оба издања у потпуности био фокусиран на јавни простор и подразумевао привремене и трајне уметничке интервенције на самој структури града. Ауторке текста баве се ширим контекстом који је утицао на програмску оријентацију и усмереност ка јавном простору, дају осврт на неке од учесника и реализованих програма, али и кратку анализу продукцијских услова рада једне градске манифестације какав је *Београдски летњи фестивал*. У закључном делу из субјективне перспективе реализаторки програма и са дистанцом од петнаест година даје се краatak осврт на ефекте програма и однос тадашњих стремљења и савременог тренутка.

Кључне речи: *уметност у јавном простору, улична уметност, графити, мурал, радионице*