

## A Deeper Dive into the City of Public Art

### *Unraveling a different Paris with Five Students from a Reform University*

As a student with a strong passion for art, being part of the Alliance of European Reform Universities (ERUA) is an incredible opportunity. Especially if the same academic consortium offers an intensive one-week course on "Art in the Public Space", and it takes place in the city with the oldest traditions of this type of works - Paris.

In May, I had the privilege of embarking on an adventure with the very same scenario together with five fellow art enthusiasts<sup>1</sup> from New Bulgarian University, with whom we temporarily ventured as students of Paris 8 - the university hosting the course. The program offered us a unique opportunity to experience the French capital in a different light, closely studying its public art secrets – from the allegories in the Tuileries Garden and Burin's columns to the famous street art district "Belleville" with its Space Invader mosaics, and all the way to the Fernand Léger Public Art Gallery and the large-scale works in the Defense Business District...

Our course kicked off in the halls of the university building of Paris 8 – a successor to the Sorbonne, where the intellectual legacies of legendary thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan still linger. Guiding the students through the ins and outs of public art was the no less inspiring Tania Ruiz from the Department of Visual Arts, who hails from Chile, but has spent the past two decades intertwining academics with her creative pursuits in Paris. Through her lectures, with infectious captivity Tania transported us on a journey that spanned the banks of the Seine and beyond, introducing both the theory of public art and illuminating some of the most intriguing moments of its history. But this intellectual exploration was just one ingredient in ERUA's recipe for intercultural cosmopolitanism, as the course offered us an opportunity to learn and connect with fellow art enthusiasts from around the world – from France and Italy to Germany, Morocco, and Ecuador, and beyond.

At the very outset, we were faced with some critical questions that we aimed to answer “on the field” over the following days. The issue of the interaction between art, the public environment in which it is located, and citizens took center stage, as we discussed the role of artwork in prompting democratic processes and the artist's responsibility of raising important social topics by bringing them to life in public places. This interplay was immediately apparent on our first tour, which took us to the Tuileries Garden. Once a place where royalty walked under the watchful gaze of Catherine de' Medici, today citizens freely wander among allegorical sculptures by Rodin, Maill, and Giacometti, as well as remarkable works of contemporary art, following the burning of the palace during the Paris Commune in 1871.

As soon as we entered the garden, we were greeted by Louise Bourgeois' group of sculptures, "The Welcoming Hands." The four bronze wrists and hands, placed on a granite base, invited the audience to touch and explore them from all angles. Here, the idea of the playing man (homo ludens) became

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<sup>1</sup> Our group included students from different majors, but all with an interest in culture and art: my grace - Roberta Koleva (BP "Anthropology"), Teodora Vuchkova (BP "Anthropology"), Vesela Marinisheva (MP "Cultural and Social Anthropology"), Dimitar Daskalov (former chairman of the Student Council, BP "Web Design and Graphic Advertising") and Alexandra Petrova (MP "Tourism Business Management").

evident, highlighting their role as accomplices who connect with the artwork, provoke it with ideas and potential problems, interpret it, and construct its meaning. While the artist may introduce the theme, the audience has the freedom to draw their own conclusions. This highlights the fact that art in public spaces cannot exist without the creative input of the beholder.

This idea was further underscored in the nearby located Alain Kirilli's minimalist installation Grand Commandement Blanc, as well as in Giuseppe Pennone's horizontally recumbent tree sculpture L'Arbre des Voyelles. Both works rely on the viewer's sensibility and inclination to interact with them, standing in stark contrast to the once-enclosed Tuileries Gardens and the adjacent obelisk on the Place de la Concorde. Unlike these contemporary works, the ancient Egyptian monument, which arrived in the 19th century, sends a clear message 23 meters above the ground – namely about France's technical prowess in transporting the heavy equipment all the way from Egypt. The obelisk's lower portion depicts the history of its movement, and the original relief from its base is housed in the Louvre. It is said that the French morals of the time could not stand the depiction of monkeys with visible genitalia from the original base...

As I found myself right in front of the obelisk, it also made me think about the issue of decontextualization in art within a public environment. Originally created as a religious monument to honor the god Ra, the obelisk now stands in a completely different location and serves a tremendously different purpose. The layers of history are visible in the city's face, as monuments are erased and inscribed onto its landscape. In fact, the whole Place de la Concorde itself was a very appropriate example of this accumulation of the historical layers of time, having once housed an equestrian statue of Louis XVI during the monarchy. The statue was then itself destroyed and replaced by a guillotine – a symbol of the death of the old political regime, on which both Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette were beheaded. Additionally, both the obelisk and the Tuileries Garden are part of the so-called Ax historique - "historical axis", "Ax historique", which places some of the most notable monuments and buildings in Paris on one line, beginning from the Louvre and passing through the garden, the Place de la Concorde, the Champs-Élysées, and the Arc de Triomphe.

But while the Arc de Triomphe is certainly impressive, it's not the only arch that Parisians have a fascination with. At the opposite end of the historical axis, stands another arch that is even bigger in size and grandeur - La Grande Arche de la Fraternité ("The Great Arch of Brotherhood") designed by architects Otto von Spreckelsen and Paul Andreu. Almost a perfect cube with dimensions of 108 x 110 x 112 meters, it was completed in 1990, serving as a spatial and ideological ending to the Ax historique. It's also a part of the larger conceptual integrity of Le Defense business district which we went on to visit next.

La Defense is often referred to as the "Parisian Manhattan," and for good reason. It is a monument in itself, with a dizzying scale that includes 72 glass and steel buildings, 18 of which are skyscrapers built in the years following 1960. The district's brittle inhospitality fits perfectly into Marc Auger's idea of non-place, which refers to sites like bus depots, stations, and airports that do not give a sense of place, despite their complexity and grandeur. According to Auger, the paradox of non-places is that everyone can feel "at home" in them, regardless of their actual origins, because they are equally alienating to everyone. Our visit to La Defense left us with a similar feeling, but despite its postmodern ghostliness, the district was also home to a lot of art.

Amidst the towering skyscrapers competing in size, we glimpsed some of the most famous and colossal surrealist sculptures of all time, including Alexander Calder's "Red Flamingo," Joan Miró's "Fantastic Characters," and César's "Thumb." However, nestled among these whimsical installations is a much older monument, one that predates the neighborhood itself - the iconic statue "Defense of Paris" (La Défense de Paris), built in 1884 to honor the soldiers who defended the city during the Franco-Prussian War. It is from this statue that the neighborhood inherited its name, and it still stands today, albeit in a context its creators could hardly have imagined...

One of the highlights of our tour was also one of the city's most playful works of art – the iconic Buren Columns, created by Daniel Buren in 1985-86. Located in the courtyard of the Palais Royal, the installation comprises 260 broken columns with black and white stripes made of white marble and in three different heights. The site was originally intended to serve as a parking lot for neighboring institutions, but Buren intentionally designed the work to be open and accessible so that the public could interact with it freely. Visitors climb and play on the columns, turning them into makeshift statues, adding an element of whimsy to the otherwise solemn setting of the Palais Royal. The site is also home to the Constitutional Council and the Ministry of Culture, making the playfulness of the artwork an interesting contrast to the seriousness of the government institutions housed there.

Another valuable experience was our visit to the Fernand Léger Public Art Gallery, which provided us with the opportunity to meet and talk with local artists, including photographer Mirela Popa, who presented us with her latest work focusing on the intersection between art and archaeology. Through her lens, she explores the work of a group of archaeologists, asking important questions about the public space in which they operate - who does it belong to, who has the power to construct narratives of the past, and what will be left for the archaeologists of the future. Her creative pursuits are closely tied to the context of Paris, where, by law, archaeologists must "examine" the terrain before new neighborhoods are built. The city is constantly evolving, and the artist serves as a mediator in this process, capturing memories and attempting to build a bridge between public places and public spaces.

During our visit, we also had the pleasure of meeting the artist Claire Poisson, whose work, for me, truly embodied the essence of public art. Her studio was located in a small open residence building on the street, which the gallery provided to selected artists for a period of three months. With no curtains, anyone could peek in, and passers-by often became part of Poisson's art-making process. Her work involved collecting various objects from people in the area and turning them into something new, much like Picasso. However, she didn't just collect objects; she collected stories, as each object was somehow connected to its owner. Therefore, at her desk in the center of the residence, we were able to unfold without disturbance the beginning of her future book, inspired by her encounters with the people and objects of the city.

However, the most exciting moment of our Paris art dive, by far was our visit to the famous Belleville street art district – arguably one of the most eclectic, colorful and pulsating corners of Paris. As we strolled through the neighborhood, we were treated to a stunning array of eclectic murals adorning the facades of old buildings, signed by iconic street artists such as Jérôme Mesnager, Kamlaurene, Obey, and Space Invader. But what truly set this tour apart was the opportunity to learn about street art in

Belleville from local street artist Codex Urbanus<sup>2</sup>, who led our tour around and gave us a live demonstration of his creative process.

From his story, we learned that it is not a coincidence that namely Belleville formed as the street art corner of Paris – now affected by the processes of gentrification<sup>3</sup>, it was once the working-class district of the city, suitable for street art because of its non-bourgeois buildings. This has to do with the problematic status of street art and the issue of renegotiation of different interests in the use of space. The paradox is that street art always expresses themes important to the public, but is practically illegal, placed on the walls without the consent of the same public, who often want to destroy the work. That's why the artist Space Invader<sup>4</sup>, well known for his street "pixel" mosaics, was the first (or so the legend goes) to put his works up high and soon discovered that if they stood at least 3 m above the ground, no one could touch them. Since then, many artists have adopted this "trick".

So, by the time to return to Bulgaria, Space Invader's art became our new hobby of sorts since we found out about the existence of an app for scanning and "collecting" his mosaics. As a result, we were constantly alert and looking up – to the facades of the city and their hidden messages. Because Paris is much more than croissants and perfumed romance, and thanks to ERUA we were able to get to know it from a different angle – as a museum in itself, a monument of monuments, on whose face a new story is written every day and another is erased. A Paris that manages to surprise you and make you ask questions. And with such a rich and unforgettable flavor, this experience stayed with our group of enthusiasts from New Bulgarian University, fueling discussions about art in public spaces long after our time in Paris. But that's a story for another day...

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<sup>2</sup> Codex Urbanus is a Parisian street artist, known for his images of hybrid imaginary animals on the walls of the city. It is mainly active in the Montmartre district.

<sup>3</sup> Gentrification occurs when new residents with greater economic (and cultural) capital move into a previously inhospitable area. In doing so, they increase property values, often pushing out older and poorer residents who cannot afford the new rents or property taxes.

<sup>4</sup> Space Invader is the pseudonym of anonymous French street artist, who completely changed the "rules" of street art. His name comes from a video game popular in the 1970s and 1980s, and unlike other street artists, he does not use paint, but ceramic tiles that resemble pixels from a computer image.