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Community Art as a Medium for Future

Abstract

In this article we will examine the possibilities of strengthening local communities through art. Art is seen as a powerful force able to bring visions to local community members and to initiate their involvement in social reconstruction. We will analyse the perspectives of development of local urban places into local cultural spaces. For such development, cooperation between artists and urban residents is recognised as highly important. Different art projects can inspire local community members to build stronger connections and help them to define visions of better society. Cooperation in artistic work can gather community members and inspire them to involve in political decision-making process. It also can improve their ability to state program of society development in a more democratic, more inclusive manner.

Role of art and alternative education, we consider as crucial in initiating social actions that are able to truly reconstruct local communities, to redefine a status and to change perception of marginalised social places and to inspire those who live in the same neighbourhood to cooperate and fight for common interest. For this reason, we will analyse perspectives of development approaches in which art and alternative education can come together to create changes.

Creation of new cultural space needs development of alternative education, that can encourage community members to overcome old prejudices, and it also needs inclusive arts practices, that can help people to connect each others

and to find their vision of betterness. Through art and alternative education they may discover their power to recreate reality and to change the situation that oppresses them. Instead to “integrate” or “incorporate” into the society that multiply injustice, alienation, and separation, they may perceive that they are members of a community, so they are able to engage themselves to participate in its recreation. If we make efforts to reimagine our cultural space, we may discover our potentials to visualise authentic development and our strength to challenge old ideological prejudices.

Key words: *alternative education, community art, cultural space, participation, theory of art.*

Statement of the problem

Throughout the years, the notion of community has been explored through various approaches. Activists and scholars alike have underline an urgent need for new understanding of community. In Western countries, increased social mobility is recognized as one of the main factors that has caused the decreased sense of community (Keyes, 1973; Putnam, 2000). Many activists come together to recreate, reconstruct and reform communities through the social relationships (Green & Haines, 2002; Hutzler, 2005). Loss of motivation to act, has resulted in acceptance of specific non-acting mechanisms. Mechanisms of non-acting are perpetuated by weakened influence on political decisions and failing educational systems.

While this perceived loss of community sense infiltrates the majority of urban residents, youths have developed a much stronger social identity. However, even they have developed a strong sense of social identity, their responses to injustice, issues of oppression, classism, etc., mostly are not directed to social improvement. One of the reasons that local social networks have not been recognised as a powerful force, able to initiate wide reform of society, is lack of vision. Schools, public institutions and media, having a reputation for developing competitive, superficial and narcissistic individuals, have constructed social context in which creativity, proactive thinking and social responsibility are highly marginalised. Lack of vision how to create a better society, as much as lack of beliefs in ability to make changes, keep members of social networks out of struggle for more influential, more democratic community.

In this article we will examine the possibilities of strengthening local communities through art. Art is seen as powerful force able to bring visions to local community members and to initiate their involvement in social reconstruction. We will analyse the perspectives of development of local urban places into local cultural spaces. For such development, cooperation between artists

and urban residents is recognised as highly important. Different art projects can inspire local community members to build stronger connections and help them to define visions of a better society. Cooperation in artistic work can gather community members and inspire them to involve in political decision-making process. It also can improve their ability to state program of society development in a more democratic, more inclusive manner. Local initiatives can be the driving force in transformation of marginalised urban places.

However, redevelopment projects, initiated by those with decision-making power rarely activate local forces. Instead of that, authors of those projects, very often, aim to motivate residents of specific part of the urban area to participate in collaborative actions that much more reflect their vision of community development than that articulate the visions of local community members. Even though there are many groups, organizations and individuals who work tirelessly to improve social conditions in marginalized urban places, many of realised programs have emphasized the role of service institutions. However, service institutions often “create a wall between lower income communities and the rest of society – a wall of needs which, ironically enough, is built not on hatred but (at least partly) on the desire to ‘help’” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993:2).

Role of art and alternative education, we consider as crucial in initiating social actions that are able to truly reconstruct local communities, to redefine a status and to change perception of marginalised social places and to inspire those who live in the same neighbourhood to cooperate and fight for common interests. For this reason, we will analyse perspectives of developmental approaches in which art and alternative education can come together to create changes.

Alternative education

Alternative education we can describe in connection with social reconstruction as a preparation and motivation for reconstruction of society that will better serves the interests of all groups of people (compare Sleeter & Grant, 1999:189). A particular interest of ours is alternative education that is connected with cultural changes. Paulo Freire explores the role of experiential, liberating education as a preparation for cultural revolution. “‘Cultural revolution’ takes the total society to be reconstructed, including all human activities, as the object of its remolding action. Society cannot be reconstructed in a mechanistic fashion; the culture which is culturally recreated through revolution is the fundamental instrument for this reconstruction. ‘Cultural revolution’ is the revolutionary regime’s maximum effort at *conscientização* – it should reach everyone, regardless of their personal path” (Hutzel, 2005:13; Freire, 1993:158-159).¹ He emphasizes that both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person, but only the first is the people’s vocation (Freire, 2005:43). One of the main goals of alternative education certainly should be a recognition of dehumanization.

¹ *Conscientização* (conscientization) is a term first coined by Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (*Pedagogia do Oprimido*, first published in Portuguese in 1968), that signify an attempt to use education as a means of consciously shaping the person and the society.

The struggle for humanization should affect not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also those who have stolen it (compare Freire, 2005:44). So we can imagine an inclusive negotiation that will not change relation between centre and margin, but that will erase any distinction between them. This inclusive negotiation must be historically radical, in Freire's understanding of radicalism, and in connection with his thoughts that "[...], sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restores of the humanity of both" (Freire, 2005:44). Alternative education should be recognised as powerful force, able not only to deconstruct mechanisms of oppression and to show that dehumanization is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order (Freire, 2005:44), but also to create new visions of struggle and to initiate radical historical changes.

True liberation, as the great humanistic task, has as its condition education for understanding of oppressive society. Only through such education, oppressed can recognise their tendency to become oppressors, which is specific for initial stage of every social struggle, as essentially wrong. Becoming oppressors, former oppressed actually reestablish old conditions, even though the roles are changed. This is why the revolution that is focused on redistribution of power, but that keeps old interpretation of society, is historically meaningless. Revolution, by which society can be truly reshaped, is conditioned by very different structure of thoughts that leads those who enter the struggle.

Understanding of oppressive society requires understanding of mechanisms of its reproduction. It requires an effort to recognise the reality of oppression as a historical fact, but not as a historical necessity. However, this can not be accomplished through official system of education, which is the part of the same mechanisms that reproduce ideology of oppression. So what we need is alternative education. Education that can change outdated ideals and that can renew our understanding of humanity.

Education that we need should provide new visions that can inspire both oppressed and oppressors to come together in a process of reconstruction of a society. What we propose here are radical social changes through reconstruction of cultural space. Different system of values, different aspirations and different horizons for future development can arise only under different cultural circumstances.

Only new cultural space can provide *the new knowledge*. What we mean when we say new knowledge are not a new results of scientific researches, but knowledge that grows on radically new paradigm. That kind of new knowledge can be accomplished only through a new system of values. That's why new cultural space is crucial for a process of overcoming all prejudices of old society.

Education for a new community should provide a perspectives for liberation. However, each revolution, which transforms a concrete situation of oppression by establishing the process of

liberation, must confront the phenomenon that during the initial stage of their struggle, the oppressed find in the oppressor their model of *manhood* (Freire, 2005:46). That is why the oppressed very often recognise a revolution as an opportunity to become oppressors. The fear of changes, which equally affects oppressors as oppressed, lead them to almost fanatic obsession of allocation of roles in a society, keeping them away from the process of liberation. Lack of vision has as its one condition desire for freedom without liberation. This is the tragic contradiction that alternative education must take into account.

Alternative education should provide necessary elements for engagement in a struggle for reconstruction of a community. Even more, it should inspire to solidarity, to active participation in community growth and to development of an authentic interpretation of community. Such concept of education has to be inclusive and has to provide cooperation between all participants in learning process.

However, while scholars respond to loss of community through research, writing and theory, activists and educators respond through social action and education, which keep their actions often in isolation from one another (Hutzel, 2005:11). Emphasizing this problem, Karen Elizabeth Hutzel recognises pragmatism as approach that coalesces theory and practice and that provides method by which more successful solutions can be found (Hutzel, 2005:11). Pragmatism is seen as approach that can connect scholars, educators and activists in coordinate action, that has strong potentials to reach success of practical application in the community. Even though scholars and educators are crucial for society reconstruction process, they have to work together to accomplish stated goals. Both educators and scholars should come together to bring new visions to life. While scholars can offer critical reflection of society and provide the new visions, educators can open access to their theories for community members.

New visions, if they are radical, can not be discuss through official institutions of some society. Those institutions are not only controlled by established mechanisms of monitoring and systems that maintain *status quo*, but they are based in ideology that can to contaminate purity of new ideas. Because of that, cooperation between educators and scholars has to be established through independent channels like alternative education.

However, the new ideas, especially if they are radical, are never easily accepted by community members. That means that alternative education is not enough. Participants in struggle for a new society have to be enlighten. They have to be inspired both to accept new knowledge and to get involved in community changing process. Alternative education aims to reach members of the society and helps them to evolve into participants and constructors of a new society. But as there no huge changes taken by one person, no matter how strong he or she is, there is also no radical changes of society taken by separated individuals, community members which are dedicated to become participants of a new society, but which are not gathered in common action. Hence, alternative education has to be unseparate from actions that connect new society constructors.

Besides that, alternative education has to find new approaches and methods that radically differ from those accepted in institutional education process. Educators should not persuade, they should not state paradigm of new knowledge as a frame that has potential to discredit all approaches that are uncoordinated with dominant systems of beliefs and with conventionally accepted methodology. Quite the opposite, they should open horizons for true thinking, which always includes reflections that are critical and creative. Alternative education process must provide experience that connect different individualities and that strengthen their critical and creative potentials enforcing them to define common vision.

What we suggest here is experiential learning through creative connectivity. Learning that initiates changes through democratic participation in common creative project. Its agenda should cut at the very nature of how old society interprets culture and knowledge. Only education that seeks to change the *status quo*, as opposed to reinforce it (Freire), has potential to develop democratic values. Such radical reconstruction we consider possible only through recreation of cultural space. Struggle for a new society may not be accomplished at a political or economical level, keeping old interpretations of the world. For that reason, alternative education should provide field of opportunities not just for free imagination but also for free creation of a new cultural space, that will be at the root of political and economic changes.

Community art

The field of community art has emerged as an umbrella over such practices as pragmatic art, visual culture art education, community-based art education, etc., in which the art is understood as closely connected with community life. Dissanayake emphasized that traditional uses of arts are inherently cultural, connected with the everyday lives of communities through ritual and celebration (Dissanayake, 1988). The same vision is placed in idea of art as community constructor. The idea of art as community constructor can be best compared with understanding of placement that art has within indigenous societies as the cultural center of their community life (T. Anderson, 2003). For indigenous society members, art was not just a symbol of social relations (Dissanayake, 1988), but also a function which strengthens social bonds (Dewey, 1934). Imbedded in the arts, shared stories and meanings create a sense of unity (Hutzel, 2005:19) by expressing the life of the community (Dewey, 1934:328). Dewey explains that social customs are uniform external modes of action because they are saturated with story and transmitted meaning (Dewey, 1934:326). Analysing the role of the arts through traditionalism, modernism and postmodernism, Terry Anderson (2003) has applied a combined approach to his vision of “art for life” (Hutzel, 2005:18). He suggested that many social reconstructionists, introduced with and inspired by traditions of indigenous societies, “have recentred art as an artifact or performance that reflects and facilitates the cultural life of a community”(T. Anderson, 2003:62; Hutzel, 2005:18). Their approach is connected with Dewey’s understanding that collective individuality and social bonds exists through the shared aesthetic of a community (Dewey, 1934).

Even though the arts of indigenous societies, arts that were communal, are the source out of which all fine arts have developed (Dewey, 1934:327), in Western theory, socially-based arts are often interpreted as pragmatic use of art for purposes that stay out of art itself. In oppose to traditional aesthetics, pragmatic theory of art is “based on the assumption that art should do something worthwhile for the members of the community that produces the art. Specifically, art should pave the way to a world that is socially, politically or (most frequently) spiritually better” (R. Anderson, 1990:208; Hutzel, 2005:21).

Like R. Anderson, Kretzmann and McKnight also suggest that artists should take a part in a process of community development. From the pragmatic viewpoint they emphasize that “artists are *weavers* whose skills help to keep [...] communal fabric intact. They also have the ability to create new patterns within it in response to current community needs and demands... An artist’s vision can even create new possibilities for community growth and further development... Artists take pride in their work. This pride grows in proportion to the acceptance not only to the artist’s sense of self-esteem but also to the community’s positive recognition of its own unique character and value” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993:95-96; Hutzel, 2005:22). They recognise artists as important participants within community regeneration process, because of their ability to bring new visions and to initiate bonding of a community.

However, affects of social mobility and new communication technology have minimized the need for local community connections within particularly territory of place. Reunderstanding of social bonding among residents of an urban area, weakens potentials of different urban places to become centres of cooperative actions for new society. Without a vision of community development, residents of urban areas stay indifferent to the wider urban politics and excluded from the participation in a process of territorial restructuring of society. Because of that, artistic initiatives focused on projects that have potential to connect residents of an urban area and to motivate them to interact each other, can influence their perception of themselves, and help them to state common vision for future growth. Participatory art projects have potential not only to provoke willingness among residents of some urban area to participate in community activities, but also to inspire them to become more active participants of democratic society.

Through development of interactive works, art can show the way how to rebuild our society to become more democratic. Beside that, artistic vision can provide ideas for innovative development of society. Describing art as inherently cultural, Lippard considers that “all art is a framing device for visual and/or social experience, it is difficult for an artform to dispense altogether with the frame, or to change frames on the spot, offering multiple views of the ways in which a space or place can be and is used. The challenge is to establish more bonds radiating out from the art *community* – to marginalized artists, to participant communities and audiences, allowing the art idea to become, finally, part of the social multicenter rather than an elite enclave, sheltered and hidden from public view or illegibly representing privileged tastes in public view” (Lippard, 1997:286; Hutzel,

2005:21). According to this point of view, we can propose a perspective of social development through reconstruction of cultural space on micro level. Reconnected through inclusive artistic projects, members of local communities will be able to state common vision for future growth of society and to share that vision with others. Art can inspire them to become more cooperative and to develop their way of thinking in a more democratic manner.

Karen Elizabeth Hutzel suggests that “community art can be situated within community organizing and community visioning as the potential to negotiate for a pragmatic social reconstructionist agenda in art education” (Hutzel, 2005:24). As an example of a successful campaign for community development in which the social capital provided the most significant assets for participation, organizing and visioning, she pointed at Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston, Massachusetts (Hutzel, 2005:24; Medoff & Sklar, 1994). She emphasized that this case study had presented a successful community mobilization effort to revitalize an urban neighborhood, where “a community mural was an important asset of this initiative, which encouraged teenagers to enter into the community development process” (Hutzel, 2005:24).

Arthur Danto (1981) and Arto Haapala (1989) regard interpretation as a criterion of the existence of an artwork. According to their point of view, works of art exist only as interpreted. Sami Pihlström compares their understanding of art with pragmatism and Popperian World 3 ontology (Pihlström, 2000:4). Aiming to specify the world of human-made cultural artefacts that are not reducible to the physical world (World 1) or to the subjective states of individual minds (World 2), Karl Popper entered the concept of *World 3*. As Pihlström interpretes, “the key idea here is that works of art, as cultural entities irreducible to mental states or to physical objects and events but nevertheless ‘embodied’ in physical nature and requiring human mental action in order to exist, ought to be as World 3 entities, roughly in the sense in which scientific theories, natural numbers, or societies and institutions are taken to exist in World 3” (Pihlström, 2000:4). It is important to emphasize that Popper within concept of World 3 had not discussed art in any detail, so Pihlström do not takes the Popperian three-world ontology too literary, but rather as a heuristic tool to be used in order to emphasize the irreducibility of the mental and cultural “levels” of existence, as Pihlström himself underlines (Pihlström, 2000). He continues that, without social institutions or practices within which works are created, received, interpreted and assessed as works of art, there could be no works of art at all (Pihlström, 2000:4). Works that we recognise as artistic, without specific world of arts, could be marked only as a commonplace objects, “[...], pieces of matter instead of sculptures or paintings, sounds in the air instead of symphonies, material copies of books and manuscripts instead of poems or novels. The existence of such works as works of art necessarily presupposes a complex network of socio-cultural relationships on the cultural level of World 3, irreducible to Worlds 1 and 2” (Pihlström, 2000:4). According to this, works of art, as cultural entities, belong to World 3, and only through this conceptual level they can be realised.

What we propose here is art that occupies whole *World 3*. It is actually an interpretation of art as a powerful force, able to reshape community that produces it. If we imagine social context as a specific material that can be used by artists, we can consider a perspective of development of such artistic practices that deal with social context. Interpretation of art we are proposing is connected with understanding of art of indigenous societies, but it also has its origins in theoretical approaches that shaped development of vanguard, socialist realism, land art, appropriation art, etc. This interpretation does not require a specific artistic strategy, but rather it gathers different artistic approaches, that are focused on reconstruction, rebuilding or reinterpretation of social context.

As Hutzel suggests “art can provide the means toward approaching a social reconstructionist agenda for a more equal and equitable society” (Hutzel, 2005:24). She underlines Beardsley’s words that “art fosters mutual sympathy and understanding and offers an ideal for human life” (Beardsley, 1981/1958:574-575; Hutzel, 2005:24). So we can imagine an movement for social reconstruction through recreation of cultural space. Aesthetic experience that gathers members of some community, becomes powerful force, able to bring new visions and to inspire to action.

Conclusion

The use of art as a community-creator has been applied by practitioners and considered by theoreticians (Adejumo, 2000; Emme, 1998; Bastos, 1998; Hutzel, 2005). Over the time, different approaches and visions how to utilize the arts as an educational, social service tool, have developed. So now we have both theoretical framework and practical experience to state basic agenda to reconstruct cultural space through art and education.

Community-based art education provides an approach to connecting classrooms to the local community. The goal is to strengthen connections between community members and art practitioners. After continuous classroom observation of art teachers, Katter (2002) have noticed the absence of community connections in schools. “As I look back over my years of teaching and my observations of the teaching of others, I sense a neglect of really connecting with community. So often the teaching of art ignores the culture of the community, as though art existed somewhere else, outside of the local community, or apart from the lives of the students” (Katter, 2002:5; Hutzel, 2005:28). Even though community-based art education practices have received scattered attention from various art educators over the years (Hutzel, 2005:28), we still need to take significant efforts to connect community members with artists and to encourage their involvement in a process of cultural space development. But this connecting should go through education. So what we need is a new knowledge that will inspire community residents to get involved in a reconstruction projects and artistic actions that will connect them into community.

That kind of knowledge should be radical and stated on democratic principles. We agree to Bastos when she suggests to incorporate Freire’s vision to promote social changes through education.

“A Community-based art education project attentive to Freire’s ideas has the potential to bring to light the context of art production through study of local art: dynamics of social interaction in a given community, as well as power struggles, cultural influences, and history” (Bastos, 1998:58). Education we are proposing here should fill the needs of all community members and should have potentials to lead them to a better society. Similar to Bastos ideas, we suggest that vision of better reality can initiate a need for changing that reality.² Our vision is to promote alternative education and artistic projects that can connect communities and inspire its members to affect changes in society, bringing new cultural context to life.

At these place we want to emphasize significance of connecting communities. Education that has democratic foundations has to be multicultural. So it is closed to T. Anderson’s concept of art for life, in which he proposed actions for a global, rather than tribal community. “This entails embracing our own cultures for their particular values and strenghts, but also recognising that our own cultural ways are not the only good and correct ways of engaging the world” (T. Anderson, 2003:63, Hutzel, 2005:30). In oppose to T. Anderson, we do not propose a global community, but a network of communities that are connected on global level. However without democratic perspective, without orientation to involve all community members and to teach them how to understand and how to help each other, any kind of education will stay powerless to bring improvement to society. What we need are integrative efforts that engage all society members, and that are strong enough to ensure cooperation for common good.

Reconstruction of cultural space is not a task that can be done if we follow the program which is state on some institutional level. Actions that are truly radical and that lead community to beternes, should be initiated and nagotiaded by community members. That is why we need art to connect residents of different urban area and to inspire them to think beyond ideological framework they had accepted over the years of ideological training (through institutions such are school, church, family, media, etc.), and that is why we need alternative education to encourage them to act.

Following Freire’s critique of *banking concept of education* (Freire, 2005:73) we can underline that any developing program that is planned without consulting community members, considers them as adaptable, manageable beings. Analysing education, Freire has noticed that “the more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (Freire, 2005:73). Like banking concept of education, that has capability to minimize or annual the student’s creative power (Freire, 2005:74), community reconstruction projects, that offer to community members an illusion of acting through the action of the activists, do not have potentials to trully reconstruct community.

² „[...] knowledge of immediate reality can incite a need for changing that reality“(Bastos, 1998:58).

What we need are not projects with staten agenda, but rather projects with an *agenda-in-progress*. Projects that have potentials to inspire to action and to involve all community members to a vision-making process. Projects that open new horizons and that lead community members aut of position of margin.

As long as we offer solutions, rather than we open new possibilities, democratic progress will stay an ideal which can not be reached in practice. The only way to change situation is to change the way of thinking. What we need is a new cultural space in which new social realtions will be made. However, creation of new cultural space needs development of alternative education, that can encourage community members to overcome old prejudices, and it also needs inclusive arts practices, that can help people to connect each others and to find their vision of betterness. Through art and alternative education they may doscover their power to recreate reality and to change the situation that oppresses them. Instead to “integrate” or “incorporate” into the society that multiply injustice, alienation, and separation, they may perceive that they are members of a community, so they are able to engage themselves to participate in its recreation. If we make efforts to reimagine our cultural space, we may discover our potentials to visualise authentic development and our strength to challenge old ideological prejudices.

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Umjetnost kao medijum za budućnost

Sažetak

U tekstu se ispituju mogućnosti jačanja lokalnih zajednica putem umetnosti. Autor zastupa stav da je putem umetnosti moguće preneti vizije članovima lokalnih zajednica i inspirisati ih na učešće u procesima društvenog rekonstruisanja. U tekstu će biti analizirane perspektive transformisanja urbanih celina u specifične prostore kulture. U tom smislu, posebno se naglašava značaj saradnje između umetnikâ i pripadnikâ lokalnih zajednica. Različiti umetnički projekti mogu inspirisati članove lokalnih zajednica na uspostavljanje snažnijih veza, te im mogu pomoći da definišu vizije boljeg društva. Saradnja na umetničkom projektu može okupiti članove zajednice i inspirisati ih na uključivanje u proces političkog odlučivanja. Ona, pored toga, može osnažiti njihovu sposobnost da postave program društvenog razvoja u jednom više demokratskom, više inkluzivnom maniru.

Uloga umetnosti i alternativnog obrazovanja u tekstu se posmatraju kao presudne u iniciranju društvenih akcija putem kojih je moguće suštinski rekonstruisati lokalne zajednice, redefinisati status i izmeniti percepciju marginalizovanih prostora, te inspirisati susedsku saradnju i njihova zalaganja za zajednički interes.

Izgradnja novog kulturnog prostora zahteva razvoj alternativnog obrazovanja, putem kojeg je moguće osnažiti članove zajednice da prevaziđu stare predrasude, ali i razvoj inkluzivnih umetničkih praksi, koje mogu pomoći članovima zajednice u međusobnom povezivanju, te u pronalaženju vlastite vizije boljitka. Kroz umetnost i alternativno obrazovanje, oni mogu otkriti svoju moć da se suprotstave opresivnim društvenim odnosima. Suprotno pozivima na integraciju u društvo koje umnožava nepravdu, otuđenje i razdvojenost, upravo putem umetnosti oni mogu uočiti činjenicu da su zapravo članovi zajednice, sposobni da učestvuju u njenoj izgradnji.

Ključne riječi: *alternativno obrazovanje, kulturni prostor, participacija, teorija umetnosti, umetnost zajednice.*



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