**Type of Contribution: PAPER**

**Uncertain Interventions: LGBTIQ Users in Public Libraries as an Example of Collaboration between Critical Librarianship and Contemporary Art**

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**Keywords: critical librarianship, contemporary art, LGBTIQ, interdisciplinarity, agonistic space**

# Introduction

Openness, inclusiveness and social justice are in the focus of activity of public libraries, which is manifested in their missions, as well as in the basic library documents – manifests, standards, regulations, codices – and is demonstrated through procurement policy, programmes and services provided by libraries. The starting point of this paper is the position of the library profession, which presupposes ethics of information sciences, as well as the requirement for the library to be a place of social justice. Thereby we problematise the concept of library as a neutral third space, which is a syntagm that is frequently used in professional circles. Elmborg states that public libraries can no longer be regarded as neutral spaces in terms of value, which indicates that librarianship is also not a neutral profession in terms of value (Elmborg 2006). This thesis is also supported by the 2016 IFLA Conference that posed the question “What comes after the 'Third Place'? Visionary libraries – spaces and users.”

An alternative to the neutrality of the profession is provided by critical librarianship, the starting point of which should be linked to critical theories and critical pedagogy. The aforementioned is addressed by Mario Hibert, who accentuates critical theory as a tool that enables the thematising of social reality, directing the librarians toward perceiving the consequences of privatisation, deregulation and destruction of the idea of the public, as “central aspects of re-theorisation and re-politicisation of their activist role” (Hibert 2014, 212-213).

This paper deals with the possibility of engaged interdisciplinary activity that is implemented at the intersection of librarianship as part of information and communication sciences and contemporary artistic practices, manifested through the coexistence and activity of the S. S. Kranjčević Library and *Prozori* Gallery, the programmatic and curatorial concept of which is largely engaged in the question of the manner in which the theoretical positions of contemporary art and their practical elaboration can contribute to further development of critical librarianship. By referring to its theoretical concepts that originated from critical theory, the deliberations of Ksenie Cheiman – and, in the context of contemporary engaged artistic practices, the concepts of hegemony, antagonism and agonistic struggle of Chantal Mouffe and the aesthetic regime of Jacques Rancière – we introduce the notion of library as an agonistic public space.

Through case study, the paper will present the project of *Prozori* Gallery “Uncertain Interventions: LGBTIQ Users in Public Libraries”, whereby the acronym LGBTIQ is used as the most encompassing and the least discriminating (Barbarić and Pikić 2017).

**Sections**

**Theoretical framework**

The introduction of critical theory into the field of information and communication sciences can be traced back from the 1970s (Schroeder and Hollister 2014). Buschman and Carbone (Buschman, Carbone 1991) stress the necessity of recognising the social, political and economic circumstances within which libraries as institutions operate, thus problematising the postulates of pluralism and positivism. Thereby they refer to Harris (1972), who points out that pluralism rests on the postulate that the current social system is the result of a democratically attained consensus, and pluralism therefore does not recognise the various social issues as possible symptoms of fundamental social conflicts. Pluralism disregards the differences that exist in relation with distribution of social power, access to information, and class. It follows from the aforementioned that the neutrality to which it refers is not able to provide a structural solution and remains on surface only. Critique of ideology is thus fixated on the practice of class struggle i.e. practice of antagonism that is inherent to every society, which is related to the concepts of antagonism, agonistic struggle, and agonistic public spaces of Chantal Mouffe, according to whom pluralism of the social world is characterised by antagonism instead of the possibility of ultimate coordination in consensus. Societies are structured through ‘agonistic struggle’ that results in a specific configuration of power relations and predomination of one hegemonic project over the other (Mouffe 2008).

A specific hegemony of public space follows from a specific articulation of the diversity of space, meaning that the hegemonic struggle is also constituted of the effort to create a different form of articulation between public spaces. Agonistically-comprehended public space articulates that which is suppressed by dominant consensus. In accordance with the agnostic approach, critical art reveals that which the dominant consensus seeks to overshadow and eradicate (Mouffe, 2008).

Along these lines, we believe that the public libraries must redefine their position in direction toward the re-politicisation of the public space of the library, on the basis of the postulates of the profession and the critical theory they are inclined to, and find in practice a channel for an activating operation. In this sense, we redefine the space of the public library as an agonistic public space.

With regard to the places of overlapping of critical librarianship, agonistically-comprehended public space and contemporary art, we see one of the possible paths toward the activating operation in the interference of the library with gallery practice.

**Research questions**

Alongside a brief review of the activity of *Prozori* Gallery, this paper will present in detail the project “Uncertain Interventions: LGBTIQ Users in Public Libraries” as an example of direct contribution of contemporary art to librarianship. The project poses the question of the inclusion of LGBTIQ persons in programmes, services and holdings of public libraries, as well as the level of meeting the information needs of LGBTIQ persons. At a parallel level, it poses the question of the transformation potential of libraries i.e. the possibility of artistic intervention in the field of information and communication sciences, and indirectly also in society. Therefore we question the artistic methods and tactics that can not only produce aesthetic or discursive reshaping of everyday life, but also transform everyday existence in the sense of creating new forms and organisations of life (Holmes 2012). Finally, we pose the question as to which strategic places and methods in librarianship serve to establish new dispositives.

**Methodology**

With the coexistence of gallery and library, a hybrid space is established that is close to the concept of alternative art libraries, addressed by Ksenia Cheinman in the text “Creating Alternative Art Libraries” (2014). She indicates the need to establish a new kind of space outside of the canon of defining institutions such as galleries, libraries, or libraries within museums/galleries, specifying the communication and dialogue aspect of both institutions as the basis for permeation of gallery programmes and library activity, and stressing the education potential and creative strategies of alternative art libraries, while bringing into focus the very education and communication potential of spaces established in such manner. Although Cheinman addresses exclusively the activation of libraries within gallery and museum spaces, there is evidently an analogy with the need to radicalise exhibition activity within the library, which would operate in the direction toward the creation of new and variable surroundings in which dialogue is stimulated by juxtaposing the holdings, different points of perception and contextualisation, and unexpected visualisations.

As also noted by Eilean Hooper Greenhill, interdisciplinarity – and especially the collaborations with contemporary art, to which the questioning of controversial and problematic social topics is inherent – therefore should not be merely a coincidence, but rather a devised strategy in creating new forms of living (Cheiman 2014).

We shall describe these aspects – the interdisciplinary and scientific research through focus group, survey, roundtable, and artistic spatial intervention – in the case study “Uncertain Interventions: LGBTIQ Users in Public Libraries.”

**Results**

The results of the project “Uncertain Interventions: LGBTIQ Users in Public Libraries”somewhat coincide with the research questions of this paper. Principally, the results of the survey conducted within the framework of the project have shown that public libraries are not recognised as sources of information and a safe place related to LGBTIQ identities; one of the important repercussions of the project was the application for the establishment of a workgroup for LGBTIQ users within the Croatian Library Association.

Although this application has been rejected, the project has enabled the deliberation on bringing LGBTIQ users into focus of public libraries. This intervention has destabilised the dominant paradigm in librarianship, indicating the existence of equally-important parallel narratives on the one hand, and the implementation of the subversive and transformation potential of public libraries by raising awareness of the aforementioned narratives on the other hand. Being aware of the complexity of protocol and the possible obstacles in the attempt at thematising LGBTIQ identities, we pursued the idea by using art as channel, method, and tactic, with the aim to open up space for new discursive, political, artistic, and library activity. Due to the financial resources at its disposal, the flexibility of the method, the power of transformation, and a certain level of autonomy in relation to the system, art has shown that it can be a channel for transformation and introduction of underprivileged identities into the space of dominant culture.

And finally, the interference between art and librarianship, as well as other disciplines, emerges as a strategic curve on the field of librarianship that is neither fixated by methodology nor tamed by hegemony. Specifically, from this position it is possible to spin perspectives and build new spaces of knowledge and manners of learning.

**Conclusion**

Exhibitions, community-based projects, different forms of education and similar methods with which we seek to develop the field of critical thinking as a foundation for social intervention, are all in the focus of gallery activity.

“Uncertain Interventions: LGBTIQ Users in Public Libraries” is an attempt at introducing and deliberating the subject of the position, visibility and representation of LGBTIQ persons in the holdings and programmes of public libraries with the help of art. Simultaneously, the project represents an actualisation of the discourse of critical librarianship as the legitimate route within the field of information and communication sciences, thus deconstructing the myth on the neutrality of the profession and questioning the transformative and subversive character of the public library in relation to the established hegemony.

By perceiving the public library as the agonistic public space in the manner addressed by Mouffe, it becomes a place of hegemony subversion. In collaboration with art, it opens up new transition zones of knowledge and learning, and inscribes parallel narratives. The joint space of the gallery and library is promoted into an alternative hybrid space, the potentials and possibilities of which are yet to be explored by librarianship.

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