EXPLORING A DIFFUSE AND UNSTRUCTURED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH FRAME: MOURNING AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL INTERPOSITION IN TIRANA, ALBANIA

KAILLEY ROCKER
ARBA BEKTESHI

1 CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL, USA
2 LABORATORY FOR ALBANIAN CULTURE AND ARTS, ALBANIA

Our ethnographic work places us in intimate proximity to those who feel neoliberalism’s affects most sharply (Hemment 2007: 302).

Introduction

By the end of August 2018, we found the above quote by Julie Hemment resounding in our minds. Over the last few years, we have been tracing a series of actions that the Albanian government has taken to appropriate older, public spaces in its capital city of Tirana in favour of private urban development initiatives and beautification campaigns. These processes often involved the de-listing of cultural monuments and the erasure of landmarks in Tirana’s city centre. Since March 2018, the government has targeted the city’s National Theatre through unconstitutional provisional laws under the guise of development initiatives, which have been labelled as corrupt by media and civil society watchdogs and protesting citizens. 1 Provoked by these efforts, we conducted a visual anthropological intervention, within the Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework, titled ‘Mourning Cultural Heritage’ – the process and results of which we address in this article. 2

Our project took place between two parliamentary voting sessions in Tirana, Albania: the first on 5 July 2018 and the second on 20 September 2018. Both voting sessions were an attempt by the majority to conclusively pass Law 37/2018, ‘On the Determination of the Special Procedure for Negotiation and Signing of the Contract with the Subject “Design and Realization of the Urban Project and the New Building of the National Theatre”’. As indicated by the title, this special law would provide the means for the government to negotiate with a private contractor for the construction of a new National Theatre where the current one stands. In addition to building a new theatre, this concession would also grant the contractor a license to appropriate the remainder of the public space for private development – which, as architectural renderings have indicated, would take the form of another high-rise tower, a defining feature of Tirana’s future as projected by urban masterplans like Tirana 2030. 3

On 27 July 2018, Albanian President Ilir Meta refused to sign the law after its initial approval by Parliament. In a statement from his office, Meta gave nine reasons for rejecting the proposed law, some of which include the following: it violated the principles of equality and competition regarding the freedom of economic activity; it infringed on the government’s efforts to operate autonomously; and it was not harmonious with values placed on cultural heritage or intangible cultural heritage, among other things. 4 Ultimately, the initial appointment of a construction company for the new theatre project without a
tendering process, as well as the various steps to introduce the new piece of legislation, violated both the National Constitution and bilateral agreements with the European Union, in view of Albania’s integration process.

Occupying a large piece of Tirana’s city centre, the current National Theatre was completed in 1939 during Albania’s Italian fascist occupation. While the building itself does not have legal protection today as a cultural monument – a status officially granted by Albania’s Council of Ministers – the theatre had once enjoyed security in the historic ensemble of the city centre, a protected zone outlined by the Council in 2000. As recently as 12 April 2017, the Council passed a decision to shrink the same zone, making buildings outside of its borders (regardless of their monument status) vulnerable to urban development projects. In 2016, the Qemal Stafa Stadium, a second category monument, was reduced to a piece of its original façade in an effort to construct a larger stadium and an adjoined luxury hotel. Likewise, that same year, the approval of Building Permit no. 8, date 28.7.2016, allowed construction on and around the grounds of the approximately 700-year old Tirana Castle, making it a modern ‘Old Bazaar’ shopping area.

Figure 1: The orange dots on this map mark the locations of the obituary notices placed around Tirana, Albania. The red box highlights the notices that were placed in and around the historic centre. GIS base map: public domain. Produced by the authors.
Figure 2: The obituaries read, ‘NOTIFICATION. It is with great sadness that we announce the loss of The Qemal Stafa Stadium / Tirana Castle / National Theatre. The ceremony will be held on Thursday, 20.09.2018 at the Parliament of Albania, George W. Bush St’. Obituary design by the authors.
Our visual anthropology project drew attention to the government’s successful and successive attempts to appropriate the public space of these historic monuments, specifically the Qemal Stafa Stadium and the Tirana Castle, as well as its ongoing attempt to rebuild the National Theatre (see Figure 2). We anthropomorphized these historical buildings, making them the subjects of a series of death notifications, or obituaries, that we placed around the historic ensemble of the city and further (see Figure 1). Through this action, we replicated the citizens’ gestures of announcing relatives’ deaths on socially designated walls, all while drawing attention to the histories, life, and death of these buildings. We also carefully documented the process, posting images of the obituaries in situ around the city and a statement for the action on our social media. Invoking the work of mourning and engaging diverse audiences across the city, our action research encouraged onlookers to question the effects of neoliberal regimes and was an attempt to carve out discursive spaces for discussion on forms of resistance against top-down political processes.

In this essay, we reflect on our engagement with the PAR framework to contribute to what Julie Hemment calls ‘critique plus’, or the desire and possibility to go beyond cultural critique and deconstruction to co-create and affect social change (2007: 302). Specifically, we argue that the cross-over between artistic practice and knowledge production can be beneficial in applied anthropological work. Furthermore, we argue for the possibility of a diffused and unstructured PAR approach that emerges across space (in multiple locations throughout the city and, at the same time, social media platforms), outside of organized activities that take time, and via the unstructured interaction of the public, challenging us to rethink what we consider collaboration with the public.

Participatory Action Research and Its Power for Social Replication

The PAR framework emerged in the late twentieth century and has since become associated with consciousness-raising endeavours that are co-constructed by researchers and the communities they engage. One of its primary epistemological objectives has been to question the sole right of the researcher to project design and expertise (Hemment 2007: 303) over that of others who are also a part of the research process, such as members of the community where the research is taking place. As such, the PAR framework attempts to destabilize the uneven power dynamics at play through the processes of collaboration and co-creation (Wynne-Jones 2015: 218). In other words, researchers and communities can both participate in research design and implementation processes that affect how knowledge is produced and distributed. As the central term ‘action’ in the name suggests, the framework is, or at least can be, socially transformative (Woodward and Hetley 2007: 101), leading participants to engage with a range of topics, from distribution of power and resources (Lucko 2018) to the construction of labour discourse and associated subjectivities (Gibson-Graham 1994: 219).

Our PAR practice, apart from our own research on representations of death in Tirana (Bekteshi 2018), tapped into the present ecology of social research practices (Clarke 2014) in the city. It relied on previous research-informed practices that articulated political resistance in Tirana – the works of both the Çeta collective and Organizata Politike (the Political Organization). Çeta has used street art to place Albanian historical figures in contemporary settings, reinterpreting popular political issues and portraying high impact political resistance in the streets of Tirana (Isto 2016). In the same vein, Organizata Politike, an
activist collective, has also incorporated street art into their resistance efforts, using graffiti throughout the city to denounce the death of more than 200 workers in recent history due to unsafe, and often illegal, working conditions (Rocker 2018).

At the same time, our project drew from sensory anthropology to engage the objects of urban development campaigns as central actants in their own right, as things that could effect change and action amongst other actors, particularly the citizens of Tirana. To provoke potential participants to draw on this connection, we treated the three historical buildings, whose contentious ruins and transformation we had taken upon ourselves to question, as subjects deserving of the long-standing mourning tradition of placing death notifications in socially designated areas around the city. Obituary notices are traditionally used for and by community members to communicate their loved one’s passing and the time and place of the funerary rite (see Figure 2). By situating these historic buildings as entities that could be mourned, we wanted to explore the potential that the everyday object – the obituary – and the everyday action of checking the notifications on the neighbourhood wall could provide. Could obituaries for objects like the National Theatre generate a sense of personal loss or collective action?

We were both nervous and excited about incorporating sensory ethnography and ‘artistic practice in the production of knowledge’ (Pussetti 2018: 3). We saw this project as an opportunity to collaborate with everyday objects and actions and reflect on the fictional side of the disciplinary borders of applied work, placed somewhere between the anthropological and artistic spectra. Further, as an anthropologist working at home in Albania and a PhD student from the United States with a longstanding experience in Tirana’s city-field, we saw this project as an opportunity to work with the abovementioned ecologies via ‘collaborative forms of work [that enable] participants [to] bring their own forms of knowledge and expertise’ (Santi 2015: 142). We understood that PAR could allow us to approach the process of applied art practice – diffusing, or spreading, obituary notices around the city – as an open-ended process and embodied practice (Sansi 2015) that could promise social transformation for our collaborators and ourselves, as researchers. As Tim Ingold (2013: 3) and others like Roger Sansi (2015: 15) remind us, the field of anthropology is a living process that promotes ‘studying with’ and ‘learning from’; it transforms researchers.

Therefore, this project was a double social learning loop for us that consisted of two feedback vectors: the first, which informed our participatory project, drew from local ecologies and practices such as mourning rituals and artistic activism; and the second, our anthropological backgrounds – our desire to inform political sensibilities of the public for socio-political development. Through the death notifications of the buildings we were denouncing injustices and equating them to the impossibility for action one faces when confronted with the death of a person. In this way, we ‘connected [...] personal, micro-level experiences of socio-political inequities to larger, macro-level socio-political forces’ (Wright 2015: 96). We were displaying the fact that the personal could be transformed into public-making, enabling the viewer to tap into participatory social learning. Our intervention, which drew from local, political and artistic traditions as well as local rituals of mourning, produced an ‘opportunity for action, albeit a perceived one’ with the implication that people could react or participate in social, political action (Wright 2015: 101-2).
Embracing Alternative Forms of Collaboration and an Unstructured Approach to PAR

We arrived at the term ‘interposition’ to describe our project because through it, we found ourselves caught ‘between’ – between public anthropology and traditional anthropological practice, and between the public and the state. Following the examples of anthropologist Julie Hemment (2007) and feminist economic geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham (1994), among others, our project did not fully embrace the traditional parameters of PAR, nor did it embrace traditional forms of knowledge production or dissemination. It tested the limits of PAR as emergent process by questioning forms of collaboration to focus on the production of discursive spaces.

Importantly, the collaboration of both researchers and community partners represents a central feature of the PAR framework. While collaboration itself is a broad term, within the boundaries of PAR, it is often defined as a series of activities or participatory projects that prioritize the prolonged engagement (presence and/or interaction) of researchers and communities. One example is the increasingly pervasive use of the participatory video (Garrett and Brickell 2015), which Yang (2013, 2016) broadly defines as a video co-created by a group of people to inquire about the social issues that pervade their lives. Another, possibly more common, manifestation is the workshop or group seminar. In her fieldwork, Julie Hemment (2007: 306) organized seminars with Zhenskii Svet women, the result of which was the creation of a Crisis Centre in Russia.

Collaboration, at least as a type of intentional and conscious engagement between an assemblage of actors, is where our interposition troubles and pushes against PAR frameworks. Unlike other projects identifying as PAR, ours did not incorporate a common or formal participatory method that used video, mapping, workshops, or some other conscious form of engagement. Instead, our collaboration manifested in a diffused and uncontrolled manner, often between humans and objects such as the building remains or the obituaries, rather than between people. Below, we present some of the different unstructured forms of community participation that stemmed from our interposition, calling us to expand, or at least reflect more on, the definition of collaboration in the PAR framework.

Alternative Forms of Collaboration

On our first day of posting obituary notices, we chose to place a set of four obituaries – two of the National Theatre and one each of the other two buildings – on a faded, pink wall in an older neighbourhood outside the city centre on the outskirts of the popular stall-shopping area called Pazari i Ri, or the ‘New Bazaar’ neighbourhood. Pazari i Ri was among the first zones in the city to be targeted by neoliberal urban development campaigns. This intervention, promoted by the Tirana Municipality, used vibrant colours to transform the aesthetics of the buildings in the neighbourhood. The colourful transformation was politically and socially charged as well as reminiscent of the former mayor of Tirana/current Prime Minister’s campaign in the 2000s to decorate the city’s grey, socialist architecture. Beyond aestheticization, the campaign regulated the market area, penalizing those without stands and increasing their rent, ultimately displacing some of the area’s well-known artisans, craftspersons, and shopkeepers.

We had chosen this wall because of its use as an information point for recent deaths in the neighbourhood – an occupation revealed both by the recent obituaries located directly above ours but also by the fragmentary, faded, and layered evidence of tape, peeling paint, and tattered paper fragments from
former death notifications. As we put up our obituaries, the sun started to set. More people were in transit, inhabiting the sidewalk and street behind us, many of them men carrying groceries. After we started walking away, we saw one Albanian man, carrying a plastic bag, stop to read the fictive obituaries and take a picture of them with his smartphone (Figure 3).

![Figure 3: An Albanian man with a bag of groceries stops to look at four new obituaries of cultural heritage buildings added to the wall. Before continuing, he takes a picture with his smartphone. Photo by the authors.](image_url)

Was lingering to read four death notifications of buildings with ascribed cultural heritage values and at risk of demolition a form of engagement? Was taking a picture – duplicating and digitizing the fragile and temporary obituary notices – a form of collaboration? Could we consider the asynchronous location of the ‘researchers’ and the ‘participant’ in relation to Figure 3 an unstructured encounter? Did these obituaries resonate with the inhabitants of this neighbourhood, who had already dealt with the effects of an urban development campaign, albeit at a much smaller scale than the current one? Standing there on the sidewalk and confronted by this moment, we were excited to see others engage with the obituaries.

Still, in the days following the initial dissemination of the obituaries, we came across another possible form of collaboration: the physical manipulation, movement, and destruction of the fictive obituaries (Figures 4 through 7). We took the picture in Figure 4 after taping a set of three death notifications – one for each of the buildings – on the side of the Pyramid, a monumental and contentious building centrally located in Tirana. It had once served as the former socialist dictator’s museum; currently it stands in semi-ruin while the public continues to use its plaza as a public space. Within three days, one of the obituaries was gone,
and the remaining two were in pieces (Figure 5). Whoever had interacted with the National Theatre’s obituary had only focused on removing its small portrait photo in the upper right-hand corner, as evidenced by the origin and direction of the tear.

Figures 4 and 5: Figure 4 (left) was taken moments after we put up three obituaries – one for each building in Tirana’s centre – at the Pyramid. Figure 5 (right) was taken three days later in the same spot. In the latter, someone has removed the obituary for Qemal Stafa Stadium, ripped off two thirds of the Tirana Castle obituary, and pulled off the photo of the National Theatre (taking a piece of the obituary with it). Photos by the authors.

In the same public plaza located near the Pyramid, we also located a crumpled obituary for the Tirana Castle in the grass near the edge of a fountain. It was about 15 meters from its point of origin – a nearby light pole (Figure 6). The other obituaries from the set – the National Theatre and Qemal Stafa Stadium – were still mostly intact, holding onto the light pole. Again, however, someone had removed the National Theatre’s portrait from the obituary. We uncrumpled the Castle’s death notification and placed it on the ledge of the nearby fountain for future passers-by to examine, take, or throw away (Figure 7). Can we think of these movements and manipulations from unknown participants as a form of response to our interposition, or our counter-move to uncrumple and re-locate the obituary as an interaction with an unknown participant? Could this be a way for those either disinterested in protest as a form of action or too frustrated to participate in the current National Theatre protest to express their political agency?
Finally, a third form of collaboration that we observed took the form of conversation about the ‘Mourning Cultural Heritage’ project with Albanians who had encountered at least one of the following: the material obituaries placed around the city, images of the obituaries shared via social media, or the project concept through discussions with colleagues, friends, and/or family members that had encountered the obituaries. For example, during the weeks following the initial phase of the project (posting the obituaries), we engaged with community members participating in the daily, localized protests to protect the National Theatre at the building itself. On multiple occasions, we were introduced to other attendees who had seen the obituaries and wanted to reflect on the power of mourning as a motivating tool, and some who mirrored their own ambitions in the obituaries and read the date on the obituary, 20 September 2018, as a call to protest the Parliamentary vote on the special law concerning the National Theatre.
Our participatory activity did not manifest in a single location, such as a conference room or an office. Like the works of Çeta and Organizata Politike, our project manifested in a diffused, or spread-out, manner in public spaces around the city and social platforms online. These alternative forms of collaboration or potential collaborations were always located in relation to the obituary object – its physical location on street corners, a visual image from Facebook or taken with a phone, or with the memory of its encounter. In our project, the obituary and its multiple locations – both online and on the walls of the city – as well as its mobile nature served to assemble different people and knowledges (Deleuze and Guattari 2003; Latour 2005), de-territorialize the government’s neoliberal campaign, and encourage almost spontaneous, or at least unstructured, forms of participation and interaction that unfolded over a multi-day period in the public spaces of Tirana. Conversations, obituary manipulations, and shared photographs contributed to what we call an unstructured PAR approach that occurred across public spaces.

This unstructured form of PAR focused less on developing shared consensus and organized participatory actions and more on ways to develop new discourse and new discursive spaces like Gibson-Grahams’ intervention (1994) that could empower people to engage issues of state power and urban development campaigns in Tirana, Albania. As such, through the spread of the object (the obituary), we found ways to disperse discussion and engagement in ways that produced alternative forms of collaboration, some of which are overlooked in more traditional participatory approaches. Ultimately, our unstructured approach pushed the boundaries of how we thought of collaboration and who we could collaborate with; it encouraged dialogic democracy and provided more open access to participation in an applied project (Paley 2002: 487).

Conclusion

Our project in the tradition of Hemment’s (2007) ‘critique plus’ embraced the call for social actors to ‘frame interventions in socially resonant and historically meaningful ways while simultaneously ... [searching for] ... new horizons and possibilities in and against discursive frames and practices’ (Greenburg 2014: 7). Through embracing both the participatory action research framework and local forms of research-oriented activism, we arrived at a PAR project that incorporated artistic methodology, manifested in a diffused geographic context, and presented us with multiple, unstructured forms of collaboration.

Our diffused, or spread out, interposition capitalized on the framework’s already existing emergent capacity (Greenwood et al. 1993) and called us to examine actions such as taking a photo, conversation, and/or manipulating the project’s object (the obituary) outside of organized activities like meetings or focus groups as possible forms of collaboration. These alternative collaborative forms remind us that all participatory projects, from video to obituary notices, are embedded within specific geographic contexts and assemblages of people, things, and knowledges, making each process a fairly unique encounter (Kindon 2015: 449). At the same time, these potential collaborations productively expand our understandings of co-creation practiced in participatory projects and encourage those intending to use the PAR framework or contribute to ‘critique plus’ to seek out new ways to record and participate in alternative collaborative encounters.
Via alternative forms of collaboration, we emphasize a point that the political feminist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham (1994: 220) made in their own forays into PAR: ‘Action research doesn’t have to focus on uncovering a unified consciousness upon which later interventions are based ...’, nor does it need to contribute to the construction of additional actionable efforts. The production of new discursive spaces and new forms of discourse can open up a space for new subjectivities or, simply, empower unknown individuals to engage in politically charged conversations on their own terms.

References


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Notes

1 For additional coverage of the public debate surrounding the theatre see the recent news articles published online


2 Our original project statement that accompanied the death notifications:

**Mourning Cultural Heritage**

In 2016, via Decision of the Ministry of Culture no. 127, date 25.05.2016, the second category monument - Qemal Stafa Stadium - was reduced to a piece of its original facade. Today, the former stadium is steadily being replaced with a larger stadium and tower.

On 12 April 2017, Parliament approved DCM no. 325 “On the Proclamation of the Historic Centre of the City of Tirana and the Approval of the Regulation for its Administration and of the Surrounding Protected Area.” This decision reduced the boundaries of the historic center and protected cultural heritage area, previously delineated in 13 April 2000 via DCM no. 180, almost 17 years before. This new outline leaves out second category monuments like the building of the old library (the former Sarajet restaurant), the Tirana Castle (or the Fortress of Justinian), and the Pyramid. Around the time of the approval of DCM no. 325, the public also witnessed one of the first victims of development - the Tirana Castle, which is being converted into a modern “Old Bazaar of Tirana” upon approval of the Building Permit no. 8, date 28.7.2016.

In July 2018, the draft law “On the Determination of Special Proceedings for the Negotiation and Signing of the Contract with the Subject ‘Design and Realization of the Urban Project and the New Building of the National Theatre’” failed to get approval. Although the National Theatre is not listed as a cultural monument by the Ministry of Culture, local and international artists, intellectuals and cultural actors have called for the preservation of this building since early 2018.

We consider the takeovers of the Qemal Stafa Stadium and the Tirana Castle, and the potential one of the National Theatre, as death work. These losses of Tirana’s at-risk cultural heritage, in favor of public-private partnerships, imply an impossibility for individual agency which is comparable to facing a loved one’s death. Our intervention extends this death metaphor by presenting a series of death notifications across Tirana, similar to those around Albania, to mourn these cultural objects. We anthropomorphize the aforementioned buildings through these death notifications.
While aware that the National Theatre still has a chance to be preserved as part of the capital’s cultural heritage, we want to use this mourning exercise as a process that can propel people, those who once gave and continue to give these buildings life, to action and reflection. And, we have decided to act before the next date of Parliamentary Debate, 20 September 2018, that might determine the fate of the National Theatre. These notifications aim to add to current awareness raising campaigns and activism centralized around protecting the National Theatre. This public intervention emphasizes the shared value of cultural monuments, contributes to the debate on the nature of public space, and carves out discursive spaces for resistance against top-down political processes.

Let us take notice and use this threat of loss to stand up.

- Kailey Rocker and Arba Bekteshi

For more information on the Tirana 2030 masterplan please see the following:

For additional information regarding President Ilir Meta’s response to law NR. 37/2018, please see the following:


(13.04.2000 DCM no. 180)
(12.04.2017 DCM no. 325)
(25.05.2016 DCM no. 127)

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