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If Billboards Could Talk: Re-Imagining Urban Spaces as Sites of Individual Expression

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Imagine a city where . . . everybody could draw whatever they liked. Where every street was awash with a million colours and little phrases. Where standing at a bus stop was never boring. A city that felt like a party where everyone was invited, not just the estate agents and barons of big business.

BANKSY, WALL AND PIECE (2005)

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine a city that gives all its residents a chance to become visible by adding content of their own to the urban landscape. What kind of content would people share with their co-residents once given the chance to do so? How would this make them feel? How would the others react to individual expressions in city streets?

In this paper, we present the findings of a real-life urban experiment (living lab) we conducted in the public space of Berlin, Germany, during March–August 2022. With this experiment, we wanted to test a novel tool of democratic and urban participation — one that would allow individual expression in urban public spaces.

We hypothesized that the tested participatory tool could ameliorate three distinct, but correlated phenomena. The first is democratic deficit resulting from the polarization of public discourse and inability of political rivals to communicate with each other. Scholars have suggested different measures of “mending democracy” and restoring the common basis for social communication. Many of these proposals advocate democratic deliberation to achieve greater understanding on disputed political issues. Others take the opposite direction, pointing out that the social discourse is oversaturated with politics and suggesting to introduce collective endeavors where politics is beside the point.

Our idea is trying a different method of de-polarizing the public discourse: providing space for individual speech. We suggest allowing individuals to place contributions of their choice in spaces that would reach a broad and diverse audience. In our experiment, we wanted to test this idea, exploring what kind of content people would share with the public if asked to make their choice without any pre-given topics and knowing that there will be no selection process, but, naturally, while remaining in the framework of the existing legal regulations. In this way, we sought to get a sense of how the social discourse would look if some spaces were given to free individual — rather than collective or channeled — speech.

The second concern our proposal seeks to address is the anonymity of urban public spaces. Although these spaces belong to the public and are legally recognized as “public fora,” practically, they are shaped and controlled by a small number of public and private entities. City residents are left with the passive role of consumers rather than co-creators of their shared visual environment. Our proposal is to create tools that would allow residents to actively co-design their city, in a simple and low-threshold way. Our experiment sought to explore whether many people would take the opportunity to “personalize” public spaces and, if so, what they would like to present there, what their motivations would be, and what they would like to communicate with their contributions.

Finally, our proposal touches upon the topic of public art. The highly exclusionary nature of art in today’s western societies is well-illustrated by the quote: “If it is art, it is not for all. If it is for all, it is not

art.”¹ Scholars repeatedly criticized the hegemonic position of art, arguing that “cultural democracy” — where everyone is encouraged to contribute one’s creativity to the shared culture — is indispensable for a true political democracy.² Our proposal joins these voices. One of the goals of our experiment was to sense whether such democratization of culture is a feasible idea. We wanted to discover what would happen if people had an opportunity to add their contributions to the shared visual environment; would many of them use this opportunity to share their artworks? Another interesting question was how other people would react to art that is shared without any selection process. Finally, it was interesting to see how important it would be for participants to receive reactions to their artworks. These findings could provide initial reference points as to how the ideas of cultural democracy might function in real life.

In March 2022, we invited people in Berlin to use the project’s website to upload contributions they wished to present on a billboard in urban public space. In August 2022, these contributions appeared on 1500 large billboards — city-light posters, 175x118 cm, which were kindly provided by Wall GmbH — throughout Berlin. We analyzed the submitted contributions, as well as other information the participants provided, such as comments and demographic data. In addition, we conducted a survey among the participants. In this paper, we will present the results we obtained and assess how far they support the feasibility of our idea of individual speech as a meaningful tool.

The paper proceeds as follows: Parts I–III discuss the three abovementioned phenomena: political polarization, anonymity of public spaces, and the exclusionary nature of public art. We explain how the envisioned participatory tool could help ameliorate each of these phenomena. Part IV describes the conditions of our experiment, and how it proceeded. Part V lays down our research questions, and discusses the methods we used to collect and analyze data. Part VI presents and discusses the results obtained from the experiment. Finally, Part VII concludes the discussion.

I. POLITICAL POLARIZATION

The current crisis of western democracies caused by political polarization has been the subject of some of the most intensive academic discussions.³ Empirical data reveals a growing hostility between political opponents, who tend to hold highly unfavorable views of each

¹ A regularly employed phrase accredited to Arnold Schoenberg; see, e.g., Harlow Robinson, Schoenberg in Hollywood: *An Operatic Tale of Artistic Integrity and Identity*, S.F. CLASSICAL VOICE (May 20, 2025), <https://www.sfcv.org/articles/review/schoenberg-hollywood-operatic-tale-artistic-integrity-and-identity>.

² See e.g., Jack M. Balkin, *Cultural Democracy and the First Amendment*, 110 Nw. U.L. Rev. 1053 (2016); NICK C. WILSON, JONATHAN D. GROSS & ANNA L. BULL, TOWARDS CULTURAL DEMOCRACY: PROMOTING CULTURAL CAPABILITIES FOR EVERYONE (2017).

³ CRAIG A. HARPER & DEAN FIDO, THE ROLE OF COGNITIVE EMPATHY IN REDUCING POLITICAL OUTGROUP AVOIDANCE 3 (2018) (“Polarization has become one of the most-studied topics in political psychology in the last decade, with scientists examining the roots, manifestations, and effects of these processes.”).

other. People increasingly perceive their political rivals as unintelligent, immoral, irrational, dishonest, and even mentally ill. They typically avoid discussions with individuals holding different political views, perceiving their beliefs as unsubstantiated and therefore not worth engaging with.⁴ This “affective polarization” divides western societies into competing “political tribes,” whose members often seek to avoid any contact with members of other tribes.⁵

Interactions with like-minded individuals tend to amplify one’s political views, and hence, political tribalism expands the ideological gap between the opposing groups.⁶ Social media also play a significant role in this process; instead of exposing their users to diverse views, their algorithms deliver content that affirms previously held opinions, thus enclosing the users in separate informational universes and deepening political polarization.⁷

Affective polarization creates an atmosphere of distrust and undermines mutual respect, which is a pre-condition for a genuine dialogue, coordination, and compromise.⁸ Indeed, empirical data shows that people tend to perceive rival political ideas as not only wrong, but also as a significant threat to the well-being of society.⁹ Hence, unsurprisingly, they tend to meet rival political leadership with mistrust and may even question its legitimacy. Political polarizations thus lead to a policy deadlock and paralyze democracy.¹⁰

This troubling situation has provided a rich ground for scholarly and political proposals as to how to restore a common basis for a democratic exchange and cooperation. A great number of these proposals take the direction of remodeling the political sphere to create greater room for deliberation.¹¹ Echoing Jürgen Habermas’s concept of

⁴ ROBERT B. TALISSE, *OVERDOING DEMOCRACY: WHY WE MUST PUT POLITICS IN ITS PLACE* 4 (2019) (explaining how the increasing divide between the political opponents leads both sides to conclude that the ideas and arguments of their political rivals are without merit and thus not worth engaging with).

⁵ Harper & Fido, *supra* note 3, at 3 (“[P]olitical partisans increasingly dislike each other, sort themselves into distinct neighborhoods, and avoid each other’s viewpoints.” (citations omitted)); James Fishkin, Alice Siu, Larry Diamond & Norman Bradburn, *Is Deliberation an Antidote to Extreme Partisan Polarization? Reflections on “America in One Room,”* 115 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 1464, 1464 (2021) (“Our division into competing political tribes has led to a tribalism of social separation.”).

⁶ TALISSE, *supra* note 4, at ch. 4 (describing experiments that demonstrate that discussion among likeminded people amplifies the members’ pre-discussion political tendencies).

⁷ ELI PARISER, *THE FILTER BUBBLE: HOW THE NEW PERSONALIZED WEB IS CHANGING WHAT WE READ AND HOW WE THINK* (2012); CASS R. SUNSTEIN, *#REPUBLIC: DIVIDED DEMOCRACY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA* (2017) (both discussing how the social media algorithms divide society into separate informational universes and how the social and political effects of this division).

⁸ MARK J. HETHERINGTON & THOMAS J. RUDOLPH, *WHY WASHINGTON WON’T WORK: POLARIZATION, POLITICAL TRUST, AND THE GOVERNING CRISIS* 15–26 (2015) (explaining how affective polarization creates and deepens political distrust).

⁹ TALISSE, *supra* note 4, at ch. 4 (describing experiments that generated this data).

¹⁰ HETHERINGTON & RUDOLPH, *supra* note 8, at 39–42.

¹¹ See, e.g., AMY GUTMANN & DENNIS A. THOMPSON, *DEMOCRACY AND DISAGREEMENT* 199–230 (1996); see also Lynn M. Sanders, *Against Deliberation*, 25 POL. THEORY 347, 347 (1997) (“When democratic theorists suggest remodeling our politics, it is in the direction of making them more deliberative.”).

an “ideal speech situation,”¹² scholars and politicians suggest creating citizens’ fora, where small groups of participants representing diverse views would have a genuine opportunity to discuss specific topics.¹³

Deliberation consists of a civil discussion, where all the participants have correct and comprehensive information, as well as an equal opportunity to speak. Deliberators put forward arguments based on reason, discuss and criticize them, and attempt to reach a consensus.¹⁴ Experiments demonstrate that deliberation can narrow the differences between initially polarized groups.¹⁵ Many small-scale deliberative citizen fora have been introduced across the globe; scholars propose to institutionalize these practices as an integral part of political processes.¹⁶

A further line of writing has pointed out that focusing on the spoken word and reasoned argumentation, the ideal of deliberative democracy, excludes other important media of political expression.¹⁷ Focusing on rational and assertive argumentation favors formally educated and self-confident individuals, who often belong to privileged social groups.¹⁸ Emotional or experience-based expression, more typical for marginalized groups, is thereby devalued and excluded.¹⁹ Scholars have suggested expanding the range of democratic communication to include such tools as visual art, sounds, dance, performance, humor, poetry, rhetoric, storytelling, testimony, compliments, and greetings.²⁰ Fostering

¹² JÜRGEN HABERMAS, THE STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE: AN INQUIRY INTO A CATEGORY OF BOURGEOIS SOCIETY 34 (Thomas Burger & Frederick Lawrence trans., 1989) (1962).

¹³ E.g., Fishkin, Siu, Diamond & Bradburn *supra* note 5, at 1479 (suggesting to foster opportunities for many more people to deliberate); Joshua Cohen, *Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy*, in DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY: ESSAYS ON REASON AND POLITICS 67 (James Bohman & William Rehg eds., 1997) (proposing ways to institutionalize deliberative practices into democratic decision-making processes).

¹⁴ Robert E. Goodin, *Democratic Deliberation Within*, 29 Phil. & Pub. Affs 81, 81 (2000) (“Deliberation consists in the weighing of reasons for and against a course of action.”).

¹⁵ E.g., Fishkin, Siu, Diamond & Bradburn, *supra* note 5, at 1478.

¹⁶ E.g., THE DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY HANDBOOK: STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY (John Gastil & Peter Levine, eds., 2005); DELIBERATIVE MINI-PUBLICS: INVOLVING CITIZENS IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS (Kimmo Grönlund, André Bächtiger & Maija Setälä, eds., 2014). See also CAROLYN M. HENDRIKS, SELEN A. ERCAN, JOHN BOSWELL, MENDING DEMOCRACY: DEMOCRATIC REPAIR IN DISCONNECTED TIMES, ch. 8 (2020) (briefly overviewing such initiatives).

¹⁷ Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça, Selen A. Ercan & Hans Asenbaum, *More Than Words: A Multidimensional Approach to Deliberative Democracy*, 70 POL. STUD. 153, 157–68 (2022) (criticizing the “talk-centric” nature of deliberation and suggesting to conceptualize deliberative democracy in multidimensional terms, so as to include visuals, sounds and presence); ANDRÉ BÄCHTIGER & JOHN PARKINSON, MAPPING AND MEASURING DELIBERATION: TOWARDS A NEW DELIBERATIVE QUALITY 25 (2019) (explaining the relevance of theatre plays or dance performances for deliberative processes).

¹⁸ Iris Marion Young, *Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy*, in DEMOCRACY AND DIFFERENCE: CONTESTING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE POLITICAL 120, 123–24 (Seyla Benhabib ed., 1996) (explaining that the rules of deliberative discourse privilege males over females, and better-educated, white, middle-class people over other social groups).

¹⁹ *Id.* at 123–25 (explaining how deliberation privileges certain types and styles of speech while devaluing and excluding others).

²⁰ *Id.* at 130 (discussing greetings and compliments); IRIS MARION YOUNG, INCLUSION AND DEMOCRACY 75 (2000) (making the case for storytelling and rhetoric); Lincoln Dahlberg, *The Habermasian Public Sphere: Taking Difference Seriously?*, 34 THEORY & SOC’Y 111, 113–14 (2005) (suggesting including humor, poetry, theatre, and ceremony in the range of deliberative practices); Sanders, *supra* note 11, at 351 (referring to testimony); Vid Simoniti, *Art as Political*

imagination and creating empathy instead of employing logical argumentation can help to overcome the difficulty of attending and appreciating perspectives that contradict one's political views. This, in turn, could help in restoring the basis for a genuine democratic discourse.²¹

Other scholars are less optimistic about the opportunities of deliberation. They point out that polarization has much more to do with group affiliation than with independent thought. Most citizens choose a group they wish to belong to, and base their political views on group identity — “us” vs. “them” — rather than on rational arguments or the desire to protect one's interests.²² Members of “political tribes” hold predictable views on a wide range of topics, and are inclined to support whatever policy they believe is backed by their political party.²³ Moreover, people even tend to deny objective facts presented to them if they contradict their party's views.²⁴ All this leaves little hope for the possibility of reaching understanding, agreement and compromise by the means of rational argumentation.²⁵

Hence, scholars have suggested moving away from deliberative discussions and discovering new ways to create solidarity and trust, thereby restoring the basis for social communication and political discourse.²⁶ Others have gone further to suggest that to save democracy, we should have less, rather than more, politics in our lives.²⁷ Such scholars argue that engagement with politics makes people biased,

Discourse, 61 BRIT. J. AESTHETICS 559, 570 (2021) (discussing the role of art in democratic deliberation).

²¹ Harper & Fido, *supra* note 3 (describing an experiment whose results demonstrated correlation between empathy and reduced levels of outgroup avoidance); Michael Hannon, *Empathetic Understanding and Deliberative Democracy*, 101 PHIL. & PHENOMENOLOGICAL RSCH. 591, 607 (2020) (“[D]emocratic deliberation can be said to have epistemic value when it fosters empathetic understanding.”); Hannah Read, *Empathy and Common Ground*, 24 ETHICAL THEORY & MORAL PRAC. 459, 467 (2021) (“[E]xperiencing common ground through empathy may play a crucial role in helping antagonistic moral opponents recognize and appreciate their common ground as such.”).

²² MICHAEL HANNON, THE ILLUSION OF POLITICAL DISAGREEMENT 17 (2023), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/551587e0e4b0ce927f09707f/t/5d45982ef352bf00011fb285/1564842036109/The+Illusion+of+Political+Disagreement.pdf> (“Citizens do not choose to support a policy on the basis of their own preferences; they instead alter their ‘reasons’ to support a party according to whichever party they support.”).

²³ HRISHIKESH JOSHI, WHY IT'S OK TO SPEAK YOUR MIND 131 (2021) (“[A] good member of either political tribe today, in the United States, has prescribed and predictable views on immigration, minimum wages, crime and policing, abortion, environmental policy Political tribes are not hospitable locations for independent thinkers.”); Michael Hannon, *Is There a Duty to Speak Your Mind?*, SOC. EPISTEMOLOGY 274, 279 (2022) (“[Political parties] encourage us to adopt views with little reflection, to let our leaders do our thinking for us, and to support whatever our ‘team’ supports.” (discussing Joshi's book)); Geoffrey L. Cohen, *Party Over Policy: The Dominating Impact of Group Influence on Political Beliefs*, 85 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. 808, 814 (2003) (asserting that people will support whatever policy or platform they think is backed by their party).

²⁴ Hannon, *supra* note 22 (“[T]he facts play no substantive role in shaping our political attitudes or beliefs.”).

²⁵ *Id.* (“[A]ttempting to resolve political disagreement by closing partisan gaps on policy issues is misguided. This is a problem for deliberative democracy. If our disagreements are not based on genuine reasons or arguments, then we cannot engage with each other's views.”).

²⁶ *E.g.*, HENDRIKS, ERCAN, AND BOSWELL, *supra* note 16, at 2–10 (2020) (discussing activities, such as knitting protests, that bring people together and create new bonds of solidarity).

²⁷ TALISSE, *supra* note 4; JASON BRENNAN, AGAINST DEMOCRACY 203 (2016).

irrational, polarized, and unable to think independently.²⁸ Interestingly, empirical data demonstrates that exposure to diverse perspectives makes people ambivalent about their political views and less likely to participate in politics. Conversely, spending time in one's "echo chamber" makes people more politically engaged, but also less open-minded.²⁹

In his book *Overdoing Democracy*, Robert Talisse points out that our shared social environment is oversaturated with politics.³⁰ Our workplaces, neighborhoods, places of worship, and many other sites of socialization increasingly turn into spaces of interaction against the background of political homogeneity. We surround ourselves ever more by people with similar political views, thus making politics omnipresent, inescapable, and universally relevant.³¹ We increasingly perceive others through the prism of their political affiliation, and distrust the capacities of our political opponents in fields that have nothing to do with politics.³² Talisse suggests taking steps to desaturate our social environment of politics by initiating collective endeavors, in which politics would be beside the point.³³ Regaining the ability to regard our co-citizens as people with valuable aspirations and pursuits that lie beyond politics would help to restore the basis for understanding and cooperation.³⁴

In addition to making specific proposals, scholars have repeatedly pointed out the general need to experiment with new tools of democratic participation.³⁵ In a way, our current project is an attempt to test one such novel democratic tool.

Our idea is to create a space where people could express themselves in a way that reaches an audience. Our proposal is to explore the medium of *individual* speech. Today, most occasions people have to speak publicly involve some collective dimension. For instance, demonstrations are organized around shared ideas, interests or identities; social media encloses their users in "filter bubbles," bringing forward the common basis between groups. Yet, collective speech is, to a certain

²⁸ Hannon, *supra* note 23, at 279 ("If we pay too much attention to politics, we lose our ability to think freely."); TALISSE, *supra* note 4, at ch. 1 (arguing that engagement with politics makes people irrational and biased).

²⁹ Diana C. Mutz, *The Consequences of Cross-Cutting Networks for Political Participation*, 46 AM. J. POL. SCI. 838, 845 (2002) (reporting experiments that yielded these results).

³⁰ TALISSE, *supra* note 4, at ch. 2 (discussing the expanding reach of politics and describing how it infiltrates and saturates our shared social environment).

³¹ *Id.* at 22 ("[O]ur workplaces, neighborhoods, places of worship, households, and shared public spaces have become both more politically homogeneous and more politically intoned.").

³² *Id.* at 120 ("[W]e tend to exhibit distrust in the general capacities of those who do not share our politics, even when it comes to those who are experts in tasks that do not involve political judgment.").

³³ *Id.* at ch. 1 ("We need to devise cooperative endeavors in which politics is not surmounted, but beside the point.") and ch. 6 (making several specific proposals of such endeavors). See also JASON BRENNAN, AGAINST DEMOCRACY 142 (2016) (suggesting that less participation in politics may make us better off).

³⁴ TALISSE, *supra* note 4, at ch. 5 (explaining how such "civic friendship" will help to restore the basis for social cooperation).

³⁵ *Id.* (explaining that there is no pre-given list of tools to create non-political spaces of democratic participation, and that this field needs experimentation); HENDRIKS, ERCAN, AND BOSWELL, *supra* note 16, at ch. 8 (calling to experiment with new ways of mending democracy: to take risks, push boundaries, and try new things).

extent, “one-dimensional”: it is always reduced to a common idea, interest or message. As such, it lacks the nuance, complexity, ambivalence, and richness individual speech may have.

In addition, since the current political polarization is strongly connected to group identities, it might be reasonable to speculate that creating space for *individual* expression within public discourse might alleviate this detrimental condition. In other words, if our social sphere is saturated with politics and largely reduced to two opposing collective voices, opening it up for independent individual expression might add some polyphonic elements to this brawly duo.

Unlike previous suggestions, we propose to avoid the choice between political and non-political themes, between rational arguments and artistic speech, between greetings and poetry. Instead, we suggest assuming an *agnostic* position as to the question what public discourse should consist of, and letting people decide on this question individually. In other words, our proposal is to democratize the very question of what kind of themes and ways of expression should belong in the social sphere.

In our experiment, we sought to explore what people — and not only scholars theorizing on the subject — feel appropriate to share with others, to contribute to the social discourse. In this sense, the experiment goes in the opposite direction than the proposals made so far: instead of looking for novel ways to find common grounds for connections between people, we wanted to allow some space for individuality. At the same time, we did anticipate that our experiment would generate feelings of social connectedness, community, and belonging. Our assumption was that these feelings might emerge not only in the context of commonality, but also in a framework of diversity.

II. ANONYMITY OF PUBLIC SPACES

The second field that our project touches upon is public spaces. City life happens in these spaces; this is where the spirit of the city emerges and evolves. Scholars point out that public spaces should function as sites of social exchange and discourse, which are indispensable for a functioning democracy. Similarly, courts identify these spaces as quintessential “public fora.”³⁶ Indeed, since public spaces are used by everyone and cannot be avoided, they provide the best opportunities for social encounter and exchange. This is apparently how public spaces functioned in medieval cities.³⁷

By contrast, one can hardly say that public spaces in modern western cities serve as sites of vivid interpersonal interactions between strangers. Starting a conversation with an unknown individual is

³⁶ *E.g.*, *United States v. Grace*, 461 U.S. 171, 177 (1983) (recognizing urban public spaces as quintessential public fora); *United States v. Marcavage*, 609 F.3d 264, 274–75 (3d Cir. 2010) (holding that parks and sidewalks are “traditional public fora”).

³⁷ Andrzej Zieleniec, *The Right to Write the City: Lefebvre and Graffiti*, 10 ENVIRONNEMENT URBAIN / URB. ENV'T 1, 7–8 (2008) (“[Ancient and medieval cities] grew and developed according to the needs of their inhabitants who prioritised social and public spaces . . . as a key feature and element of collective belonging and the shared experience of the town and the city.”).

regarded as awkward and even intrusive behavior.³⁸ Moreover, scholars note that public spaces are increasingly commercialized and privatized.³⁹ This trend redefines the shared spaces as sites primarily designed for consumption, and reduces social participation in the public sphere to the liberty to consume, driving away any chance for spontaneity and creativity. As Bradley Garrett puts it, “the potential range of spatial engagement [in commercialized public spaces] can fit in a coffee cup.”⁴⁰

Public spaces turn us into consumers in another sense: most of us passively consume urban semantics most of the time. The visual design of cityscapes is highly expressive. Cityscapes tell us stories — of wealth and poverty, of power and weakness, of social acceptance and rejection, of winners and losers. The high fences around private homes emphasize the power of wealth;⁴¹ advertising billboards teach us about the central role of consumption in our lives;⁴² and whitewashed graffiti signifies that personal messages are out of place in public space.⁴³ Persistent, but barely noticed, cityscapes educate us about what is socially acceptable, what is important, and what the right order of things in society is.⁴⁴

Although public spaces are defined as “quintessential public fora,” this status has practical significance only in the field of temporal speech, such as demonstrations, rallies, and the distribution of handbills.⁴⁵ Adding new expressive elements to the cityscapes or altering the existing ones is forbidden.⁴⁶ Thus, while everyone may access public spaces, cityscapes are created by a limited social group, consisting predominantly of urban planners, property owners, and commercial enterprises.⁴⁷ This defines most citizens as mere consumers, rather than co-creators of urban semantics.

Scholars have pointed out how commercialized cityscapes police social behavior, colonize daily experiences, impose values of consumer culture on city residents, and exclude groups that do not fit into

³⁸ Luca M. Visconti, John F. Sherry, Jr., Stefania Borghini, & Laurel Anderson, *Street Art, Sweet Art? Reclaiming the “Public” in Public Place*, 37 J. CONSUMER RSCH. 511, 522 (2010).

³⁹ E.g., Bradley L. Garrett, *Squares for Sale! Cashing Out on Public Space*, in THE RIGHT TO THE CITY: A VERSO REPORT 39, 40–41 (2017) (ebook).

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 42.

⁴¹ Mojtaba Valibeigi & Faezeh Ashuri, *Deconstruction and Fractalization of Urban Identity*, 7 J. URB. SOC’Y’S ARTS 1, 4 (2020).

⁴² See Katya Assaf, *The Dilution of Culture and the Law of Trademarks*, 49 IDEA 1, 80–81 (2008).

⁴³ Rachel Heidenry, *The Murals of El Salvador: Reconstruction, Historical Memory and Whitewashing*, 4 PUB. ART DIALOGUE 122, 135–136, 139–41 (2014).

⁴⁴ See, e.g., JANE JACOBS, *THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN CITIES* (Vintage Books 1992) (1961); CLARE C. COOPER, *EASTER HILL VILLAGE: SOME SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF DESIGN*, 198–201 (1975).

⁴⁵ William M. Howard, Annotation, *Constitutionality of Restricting Public Speech in Street, Sidewalk, Park, or other Public Forum—Characteristics of Forum*, 70 AM. L. REPS. 6th 513 (2011, updated 2023). See also, e.g., *City of Cincinnati v. Discovery Network, Inc.*, 507 U.S. 410, 428–30 (1993) (invalidating city’s ban on the distribution of commercial handbills in public spaces).

⁴⁶ E.g., D.C. CODE § 22–3312.01 (2025) (defining such behavior as a crime); CAL. PENAL CODE § 594 (West 2024) (same).

⁴⁷ Katya Assaf-Zakharov & Tim Schnetgöke, *(Un)Official Cityscapes: The Battle Over Urban Narratives*, 57 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 177, 179 (2022).

commercial playgrounds.⁴⁸ Perhaps one of the most striking features of urban landscapes shaped by strategies of capital is their gravitation towards homogeneity.⁴⁹ Store signs and billboards of global brands lighten cities across the globe with their neon sameness. In London and Berlin, New York and Singapore, streets greet people with H&M, Starbucks and Adidas, making it sometimes almost hard to tell cities apart. What makes cities truly unique are people, but their individuality remains largely invisible in the fabric of urban semantics.

A notable exception in this theatre of anonymity is graffiti. The practice of non-commissioned writing and painting on various visible urban surfaces relentlessly challenges the hegemonic power of property, commerce, and politics that shape our visual environment.⁵⁰ Using various urban surfaces as canvases, graffiti “disrupts the aesthetic fabric of the urban environment,” demonstrating that an alternative vision of public space is possible and making its own claim over urban semantics.⁵¹ Graffiti writers are driven by numerous motivations, such as exercising their artistic skills, experiencing creative freedom, enjoying the thrill of risk, marking their presence, greeting the passerby, gaining recognition within the graffiti community, expressing themselves, awakening public consciousness on a social issue, making art accessible for everyone, and beautifying their city.⁵² Yet, graffiti is an illegal and risky endeavor, which naturally makes the circle of its creators rather exclusive.⁵³

In our experiment, we wanted to explore what would happen if people have an opportunity to emblazon public spaces with their personal messages in a legal way. This line of thought connects to the discourse on “the right to the city.” A term coined by Henri Lefebvre, the right to the city entails the right of the residents to actively engage in

⁴⁸ Zieleniec, *supra* note 37, at 6 (“Hegemonic values and meanings are imposed on those who live in cities through dominant representations. . . . Instead of being able to inhabit and use social, public or collective space freely we are forced to endure a habitat created by and for the needs of capital.”); Visconti, Sherry, Borghini & Anderson, *supra* note 38, at 513 (pointing out that urban public spaces are increasingly conceptualized as commercial “playgrounds” that “inevitably exclude[] some social groups”).

⁴⁹ Zieleniec, *supra* note 37, at 7 (“As neo-liberal global capitalism colonises more of the world so more towns and cities . . . are subject to the planning and design strategies of capital that mould and shape their form to meet their own ends. . . . What is produced as urban landscapes is a perpetual sameness . . .”).

⁵⁰ Stefano Bloch, *Challenging the Defense of Graffiti*, in *Defense of Graffiti*, in ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF GRAFFITI AND STREET ART 440, 443–45 (Jeffrey Ian Ross ed., 2016) (describing graffiti as a practice of symbolic resistance); Jamison Davies, *Art Crimes?: Theoretical Perspectives on Copyright Protection for Illegally-Created Graffiti Art*, 65 ME. L. REV. 27, 47–48 (2012) (discussing the message of opposition to property and commerce embedded in graffiti).

⁵¹ Cameron McAuliffe & Kurt Iveson, *Art and Crime (and Other Things Besides . . .)*: *Conceptualising Graffiti in the City*, 5 GEOGRAPHY COMPASS 128, 140 (2011); *see generally* Renia Ehrenfeucht, *Art, Public Spaces, and Private Property Along the Streets of New Orleans*, 33 URB. GEOGRAPHY 965, 976 (2014).

⁵² McAuliffe & Iveson, *supra* note 51, at 135 (discussing the various motivations of graffiti writers); Ana Christina DaSilva Iddings, Steven G. McCafferty & Maria Lucia Teixeira da Silva, *Conscientização Through Graffiti Literacies in the Streets of a São Paulo Neighborhood: An Ecosocial Semiotic Perspective*, 46 READING RSCH Q. 5, 6 (2011) (same).

⁵³ Ricardo Campos, *Graffiti Writer as Superhero*, 16 EUR. J. CULTURAL STUD. 155, 163 (2012) (explaining the risks associated with graffiti and how they function as a mechanism of exclusion).

the creation and recreation of their shared spaces.⁵⁴ We were curious to discover if many people would take the opportunity to “personalize” city streets — in this case, one could argue that graffiti is only a symptom of a larger phenomenon of people wishing to leave a personal mark in the public space. Consequently, developing tools to allow this kind of expression could meaningfully advance their “right to the city,” and fill in this vague theoretical concept with specific content.

Indeed, although many projects have advanced the idea of urban placemaking in various forms, they have always entailed some sort of selective criteria. For instance, some of them conducted competitions, others prescribed specific topics, others still focused on particular social groups.⁵⁵ Yet, no attempt has been undertaken so far to discover what people would share in urban public spaces once they have an opportunity to do so freely, without given topics or quality judgements. In this sense, our experiment tests an entirely novel idea.

III. EXCLUSIONARY PUBLIC ART

The third context our experiment touches upon is public art. In addition to commercial messages and graffiti, official public art — including commissioned street art — constitutes a conspicuous expressive element of the cityscapes. City planners and real estate developers in many western cities increasingly work to incorporate artistic elements in urban design.⁵⁶ Scholars criticize this tendency, pointing out that public art often causes gentrification of neighborhoods, resulting in demographic displacement.⁵⁷ Others suggest that although seemingly apolitical, public art reinforces the existing division of social power, creating the appearance of harmony and glossing over inequality, suppression, and injustice.⁵⁸ Interestingly, even art with critical content may act to suppress the very voice it articulates by aestheticizing, and thus taming, its subversive message. Consider, for example, the meaning of anti-consumerist messages decorating Nike and Sony stores, or an artwork depicting the evil face of capital adorning the headquarters of the European Central Bank.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ HENRI LEFEBVRE, *The Right to the City*, in WRITINGS ON CITIES 63, 63–183 (Eleonore Kofman & Elizabeth Lebas eds. & trans., 1996); see also David Harvey, *The Right to the City*, 27 INT’L J. URB. & REG’L RSCH. 939, 941 (2003); Mark Purcell, *Possible Worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the Right to the City*, 36 J. URB. AFF. 141, 149 (2014).

⁵⁵ E.g., DaSilva Iddings, McCafferty & Teixeira da Silva, *supra* note 52, at 9 (explaining their project which involved both pre-given topics and competition among the participants); Alison Mary Baker, *Constructing Citizenship at the Margins: The Case of Young Graffiti Writers in Melbourne*, 18 J. YOUTH STUD. 997, 1002 (2015) (explaining their project which focused on the group of young graffiti writers).

⁵⁶ Joanne Sharp, Venda Pollock & Ronan Paddison, *Just Art for a Just City: Public Art and Social Inclusion in Urban Regeneration*, 42 URB. STUD. 1001, 1004 (2005) (“In the UK, as in many other contemporary Western countries, public art appears to have an increasingly prominent role in urban design.”).

⁵⁷ Stuart Cameron & Jon Coaffee, *Art, Gentrification and Regeneration — From Artist as Pioneer to Public Arts*, 5 EUR. J. HOUS. POL’Y 39, 51 (2005).

⁵⁸ Sharp, Pollock & Paddison, *supra* note 56, at 1018.

⁵⁹ See Andrea Mubi Brighenti, *Graffiti, Street Art and the Divergent Synthesis of Place Valorization*, in ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF GRAFFITI AND STREET ART 158–67, 162–63 (Jeffrey Ian Ross ed., 2016).

Making public art more independent, inclusive, and multi-voiced is a hotly-debated topic in academic literature, urban planning, and the artistic world.⁶⁰ Indeed, numerous projects that involved local residents in the process of decisions about and the active co-creation of art in their communities reported enhanced feelings of belonging, visibility, and cohesion.⁶¹ Some scholars oppose this trend, arguing that the role of public art is not to enhance the sense of community and belonging (and thereby soothing conflicts), but rather to create “dissensus” and sustain and amplify contradictory voices representing the diversity of people using public spaces.⁶² Others worry that art created by communities tends to be devalued, perceived as “not real art,” imposing another criterion of exclusion to already marginalized communities.⁶³

This corresponds with broader discourses about what art is, and about its proper role in a democratic society. The contemporary perception of art is indeed unique in its combination of wide-open and restrictive elements. On the one hand, the concept of art has undergone significant liberalization, perhaps reaching the ideal of being “unbound to any form,” akin to an idea envisioned by Kazimir Malevich as he described “in the year 1913, in my desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity, I took refuge in the square form.”⁶⁴ Modern art is largely limitless in form, encompassing a toilet sink, as in the famous Marcel Duchamp’s sculpture, and dissected human and animal bodies, as in Gunther von Hagens’s exposition “Body Worlds.” Any object may become a work of art when an artist decides to designate it as such.⁶⁵

This highly inclusive attitude toward art, however, is confronted by another social tendency: to perceive only those few individuals who have been singled out by art experts and/or market demand as “artists,” and to regard only works created by these individuals as “genuine” art. This results in a very small group of individuals being perceived as artists, to the exclusion of all other people who create artistic works. The coexistence of these two opposing trends, the ultra-open one and the closed tight-as-a-drum one, leaves many people quite confused and

⁶⁰ Ann Markusen, *Creative Cities: A 10-Year Research Agenda*, 36 J. URB. AFF. 567, 575–82 (2014) (making an overview of these debates); Sharp, Pollock & Paddison, *supra* note 56, at 1003 (“[P]ublic art should be able to generate a sense of ownership forging the connection between citizens, city spaces and their meaning as places through which subjectivity is constructed.”).

⁶¹ E.g., DaSilva Iddings, McCafferty & Teixeira de Silva, *supra* note 52, at 8.

⁶² ROSALYN DEUTSCHE, EVICTIONS: ART AND SPATIAL POLITICS, 270 (1996) (arguing that those who see public art as enhancing community miss the point in that they “presume that the task of democracy is to settle, rather than sustain, conflict”); Chantal Mouffe, *Art as an Agnostic Intervention in Public Space*, 14 OPEN 6, 12 (2008) (“[C]ritical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate.”).

⁶³ E.g., Mae Shaw & Rosie Meade, *Community Development and the Arts: Towards a More Creative Reciprocity*, in LEARNING WITH ADULTS: INT’L ISSUES IN ADULT EDUC., 195, 201 (Peter Mayo ed., 2013).

⁶⁴ GERRY SOUTER, MALEVICH: JOURNEY TO INFINITY 110 (2008) (quoting KAZIMIR MALEVICH, SUPREMATIST MANIFESTO (1915)).

⁶⁵ Nan Rosenthal, *Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968)*, THE MET: HEILBRUNN TIMELINE OF ART HISTORY (Oct. 2004), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/duch/hd_duch.htm.

dubious of their capacity to judge any artwork at all.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, cultural gatekeepers often define art in exclusionary terms, holding the view that only a small minority of people are able to appreciate art. As Arnold Schoenberg put it: “If it is art, it is not for all. If it is for all, it is not art.”⁶⁷ This has led several scholars to argue that identifying what is and what is not art often serves to preserve status and power rather than to determine quality.⁶⁸

Some politicians and scholars advocate moving away from expert-dominated toward a market-based perception: art should be defined as creative works that enjoy sufficient demand.⁶⁹ Notwithstanding its more egalitarian appeal, this perception is also highly exclusive, since it demands fame, which only a very small group of artists achieve. In practice, these two perceptions of art — expert-based and market-based — coexist and are interconnected: expert support helps an artist to gain fame, and fame helps get the experts’ approval.⁷⁰

One may wonder why it is important to define art. The main importance of this definition naturally lies in the fields that involve judgement of artworks, such as competitions for public funding, selection of works for museums, and — more to the point of our discussion — for display in public spaces. In fact, people identified as artists are the only ones who have meaningful opportunities for *individual* expression in public: whereas politicians speak for the groups they represent and copywriters speak for their corporations, artists are expected to speak for themselves. In other words, the title of “real art” is associated with tangible privileges. Unsurprisingly, many voices call for democratization of processes that grant this valuable title.⁷¹ Suggestions as to how democratization of art should occur include expanding the category of “art” to embrace practices many people understand and

⁶⁶ Angelina Hawley-Dolan & Ellen Winner, *Seeing the Mind Behind the Art: People Can Distinguish Abstract Expressionist Paintings from Highly Similar Paintings by Children, Chimps, Monkeys, and Elephants*, 22 PSYCH. SCI. 435 (2011) (describing an experiment in which participants were able to distinguish paintings made by well-known modern artists from creations of toddlers, chimpanzees, and elephants at a rate only slightly above chance); see also Axel Cleeremans, Victor Ginsburgh, Olivier Klein & Abdul Noury, *What’s in a Name? The Effect of an Artist’s Name on Aesthetic Judgments*, 34 Empirical Stud. Arts 126 (2015) (explaining that when a certain picture was painted by a famous artist, people tended to evaluate it much more favorably).

⁶⁷ ARNOLD SCHOENBERG, *New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea*, in STYLE AND IDEA, 113, 122 (Leonard Stein ed., Leo Black, trans., 1984); see also JOHN HOLDEN, DEMOCRATIC CULTURE: OPENING UP THE ARTS TO EVERYONE 18 (2008) (“[T]he cultural gatekeepers of the avant-garde go so far as to *define* art in terms of exclusivity.”).

⁶⁸ HOLDEN, *supra* note 67, at 14 (“[I]n the cultural field, sometimes people are ‘pretending to maintain standards but really just preserving status’; we must beware of ‘taste as power pretending to be common sense.’”).

⁶⁹ LAMBERT ZUIDERVAART, *ART IN PUBLIC: POLITICS, ECONOMICS, AND A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE* 6–7 (2011).

⁷⁰ Alain Quemin, *The Superstars of Contemporary Art: A Sociological Analysis of Fame and Consecration in the Visual Arts through Indigenous Rankings of the “Top Artists in the World,”* 66 REVISTA DO INSTITUTO DE ESTUDOS BRASILEIROS 18, 45 (2017).

⁷¹ ZUIDERVAART, *supra* note 69, at 278 (“[L]iberal representative democracies . . . not only exclude many people from the channels of governance but also restrict the scope of democracy to the political arena, leaving economic and cultural orders as exploitative and hegemonic as ever.”).

enjoy;⁷² including diverse public voices in decisions about art,⁷³ and supporting artistic practices that challenge hegemonic values and social structures.⁷⁴

Another line of writing focuses on art creators rather than on its addressees. Scholars propose allowing access and opportunities for everyone to engage in the creation of the shared culture, so that everyone has a chance to become a co-creator rather than a mere consumer of art.⁷⁵ In this view, such “cultural democracy” — where everyone is encouraged to contribute one’s creativity to the shared culture — is indispensable for a true political democracy.⁷⁶ Somewhat similarly, Marxist and feminist voices have long challenged the narrow focus of modern democracies on politics, to the exclusion of culture.⁷⁷

Our proposal joins these voices. One of the goals of our experiment was to sense whether democratization of culture (letting anyone interested to create and present art) is a feasible idea. Specifically, we wanted to discover what would happen if people had an opportunity to add their contributions to the shared visual environment. Would many of them use this opportunity to share their creative works? Another interesting question was how other people would react to art that is shared without any selection process, art that was neither defined as such by experts nor created by famous artists. These findings could provide initial reference points as to how the ideas of cultural democracy might function in real life.

IV. THE EXPERIMENT: THEORETICAL IDEA MEETS REAL LIFE

Most visible surfaces that shape the cityscapes are private or public property. Hence, an experiment that intends to let people place expressive messages of their choice on such surfaces inevitably requires cooperation of entities that control them. We were fortunate to receive the generous sponsorship of Wall GmbH that provided 1500 places on billboards (city-light posters, 175x118 cm) throughout Berlin for our experiment. We used these spaces to present individual contributions.

We called the project “Du bist am Zug,” which can be translated as “it’s your move” (in a game), but also “it’s your turn” (to act, to do

⁷² Markusen, *supra* note 60, at 579.

⁷³ HOLDEN, *supra* note 67, at 23 (“Questions of cultural excellence cannot and should not be determined solely by a group of peers It is essential that the many competing voices of the public are admitted into the debate as well.”); François Matarasso, *Whose Excellence?*, 171 ARTS PRO. 2, 8 (2008) (“[W]hat really needs to be excellent is the conversation we have about culture And a rich, generous and democratic debate about culture is entirely achievable—if we want it.”).

⁷⁴ DAVID SCHWARTZ, ART, EDUCATION, AND THE DEMOCRATIC COMMITMENT: A DEFENSE OF STATE SUPPORT FOR THE ARTS, 50–56 (2000).

⁷⁵ HOLDEN, *supra* note 67, at 26 (“The goal [should] be for everyone to have physical, intellectual and social access to cultural life, and to have the ability and confidence to take part in and fashion the culture of today.”); *Id.* at 32 (“Culture should be something that we all own and make, not something that is ‘given’, ‘offered’ or ‘delivered’ by one section of ‘us’ to another.”).

⁷⁶ *Id.* at 34 (“It is only when we have a cultural democracy, where everyone has the same capacity and opportunity to take part in cultural life, that we will have a chance of attaining a true political democracy.”).

⁷⁷ See ZUIDERVAART, *supra* note 69, at ch. 9.

something). It operated via a website, on which people could upload contributions — either in the form of a text or an image — they wished to present on billboards in Berlin. Participants could submit one contribution in their own name and two additional contributions in their children's names.⁷⁸ To make sure that no bots take part in our experiment, we required an e-mail verification to complete the submission. The website explained that there are no given topics and that no competition will take place. Should we have received more than 1,500 contributions, we would raffle off the places on billboards among the participants.⁷⁹

Our real-life experiment could not allow unlimited freedom of expression. Placing a message on a billboard in Berlin is subject to legal regulations of speech — such as copyright, privacy protection, as well as laws banning libel, incitement, and pornography. We referred to these restrictions on the project's website, which certainly could have affected the choices of the participants as to the content of their contributions. In addition, Wall GmbH has its own rules regulating the content of its billboards. Since we did not have deep knowledge of these rules, we only stated on the website that we reserve the right to exclude contributions that could be harmful to our sponsor. We do not expect this general statement to have affected the participants' behavior. Additional types of speech we excluded were advertising, links to websites, usernames in social media, and identical contributions submitted by several persons. This is because our idea was to create a medium for individual speech.

We wanted to collect some data about the participants, such as age, gender, place of birth, and occupation. However, lengthy forms could jeopardize our idea of allowing an easy and low-threshold participation. Hence, we decided to make sharing of the additional data non-mandatory. Similarly, our website encouraged the participants to tell more about their contributions by leaving comments.

The project's website opened for submissions in the last week of April 2022, and closed in the first week of June, so we had six weeks to collect the contributions. To be successful, *Du bist am Zug* needed visibility. Hence, we used various ways to advertise it: it had its own social media;⁸⁰ we posted information about it in relevant Facebook groups, and used paid advertising on Instagram and Facebook. In addition, we made an effort to get a good coverage in the local press,⁸¹

⁷⁸ We invited people with more than two children to contact us in order to submit additional contributions in the names of their children, but no one made use of this suggestion.

⁷⁹ Katya Assaf-Zakharov & Tim Schnetgöke, Notes from Telephone Call, on file with the authors.

⁸⁰ *Du bist am Zug*, FACEBOOK (last visited Feb. 2, 2025), <https://www.facebook.com/dubistamzugberlin>; *Du bist am Zug* (@dubistamzugberlin), INSTAGRAM (last visited Feb. 2, 2025), <https://www.instagram.com/dubistamzugberlin/>.

⁸¹ *Ein "instagram" fürs sommerliche Straßenbild*, BERLINER ABENDBLATT (May 16, 2022), <https://berliner-abendblatt.de/berlin-news/du-bist-am-zugplakatreihen-fuer-jedermann-id155731>;

Aktion "Du bist am Zug" bringt Sie auf Plakatwänden groß raus, B.Z. (May 17, 2022), <https://www.bz-berlin.de/ich-und-berlin/aktiondu-bist-am-zug-bringt-sie-auf-plakatwaenden-gross-raus>; see Dirk Jericho, *Die Stadt Wird zur Bürgergalerie*, BERLINER WOCHE (May 20, 2022, 6:00 AM), <https://www.berliner-woche.de/mitte/c-kultur/im-rahmen-des-projekts-du-bist-am-zug>

on the radio⁸² and television,⁸³ as well as in popular social media channels, including the official channel of the city of Berlin. Finally, we employed our personal contacts to spread the word.

To be sure, our contacts and our abilities — for instance, the languages we speak — must have influenced the identity of the participants. Yet, any experiment of this kind is deemed to have some “subjective” factors. We made significant efforts to embrace a possibly broad audience, reaching out to diverse groups and institutions — including schools, universities, and colleges, as well as the Turkish, Kurdish, Israeli, Arabic, Russian, and Ukrainian communities in Berlin. We did not have a strict requirement that participants should be located in Berlin, but all our communication channels addressed primarily people in Berlin and, accordingly, a prevailing majority of the participants were located in Berlin.

We received 771 contributions, 666 of which withstood our submission criteria.⁸⁴ Since we had 1500 billboards at our disposal, we could present all the contributions twice, some of them three times, and we raffled off the places for the third presentation. Thus, in August 2022, personal messages appeared on 1500 billboards throughout Berlin. Wall GmbH provided us with information about the location of the billboards with *Du bist am Zug*’s contributions, but we did not know which contribution appears on which billboard because it would have been enormously complicated for Wall’s workers to keep track of it. Since the posters were supposed to hang for only a couple of weeks, Berlin is a big city, and we were a very small research team, we did not have enough time to visit all the locations, and discover which posters hang on which spot.

We were not aware of these circumstances when we started the project, so we had to find an instant solution to help the participants find their contributions in the streets of Berlin. Once again, we used all the available communication channels to invite the project’s participants — as well as non-participants — to join us in this “Easter egg hunt,” and publish the posters they find on social media with their location and the hashtag #dubistamzug.⁸⁵ All the project’s posters were also provided with text asking those who discover them to share their location on social media.

kann-jeder-fotos-gedichte-und-zeichnungen-einreichen_a346331; Dirk Jericho, *Private Botschaften auf Werbewänden: Kunstprojekt „Du Bist am Zug“ Bringt Bürgerbilder Groß Raus*, BERLINER WOCHE (July 24, 2022, 2:00 PM), https://www.berliner-woche.de/mitte/c-kultur/kunstprojekt-du-bist-am-zug-bringt-buergerbilder-gross-raus_a353093; Redaktion, *Projekt „Du bist am Zug“ gestartet [Project “It’s your turn” launched]*, BLICKPUNKT BRANDENBURG (May 27, 2022), <https://blickpunkt-brandenburg.de/nachrichten/artikel/projekt-du-bist-am-zug-gestartet>; Fotomagazin, May 27, 2022.

⁸² We got to speak about the project at RBB-Kultur, radio eins, Radio Paradiso, RBB-88.8 and Cosmo po-russki. COSMO po-russki, *Ispol’zui’ vozmozhnost’ sdelat’ Berlin krasivee* [Take the Opportunity to Make Berlin More Beautiful], WDR, at 0:10 (May 5, 2025), <https://www1.wdr.de/radio/cosmo/programm/sendungen/radio-po-russki/gesellschaft/dubistamzug-106.html>.

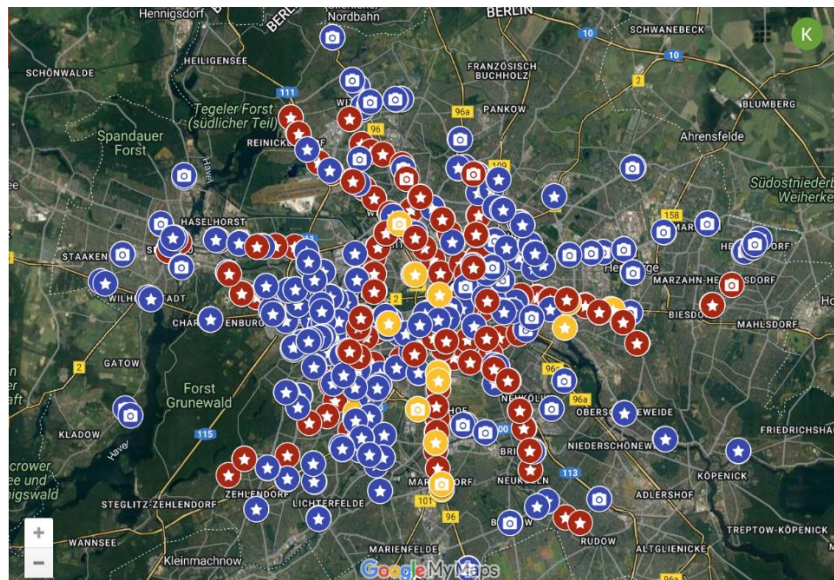
⁸³ The project was covered in the television program *Abendschau* on July 26, 2022.

⁸⁴ Katya Assaf-Zakharov & Tim Schnetgöke, Notes from Telephone Call, on file with the authors.

⁸⁵ *Du bist am Zug* (@dubistamzugberlin), INSTAGRAM, (July 29, 2022) <https://www.instagram.com/p/CglueOSM8Cj/>.

Some participants responded enthusiastically to our call and actively looked for billboards with *Du bist am Zug*'s contributions; others followed the hashtag in hope that someone would discover their poster (some even promised a prize to the finder); others still (participants and non-participants) accidentally discovered the individual messages in the public space. This unplanned turn added a playful element to the project and created a vivid online dynamic around it.

The intensive online sharing of posters discovered in various locations in Berlin resulted in a huge amount of sporadic information.⁸⁶ We were lucky to receive an offer from one of the project's participants to build a "treasure map," where the participants could easily find their contributions by typing in their names in the search function.⁸⁷ This allowed an absolute majority of the participants to discover their posters.



Blue points indicate posters at subway stations, the red – posters on columns, and the yellow – posters that we were unable to allocate. Stars indicate that the posters were found.

Du bist am Zug was by no means a typical scientific experiment. It was a pilot project implementing a conceptual idea — creating space for individual expression in public discourse — in one particular way. It took place in Berlin during the summer of 2022, in the midst of the war in Ukraine and two years after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

⁸⁶See *Du bist am Zug* (@dubistamzugberlin), *Gefunden!*, INSTAGRAM, <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/18005349985455426/> (last visited Feb. 7, 2025); *Du Bist Am zug* (@dubistamzug), INSTAGRAM, (last visited Jan. 28, 2025), <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17921731796382876/>; *Du Bist Am zug* (@dubistamzug), INSTAGRAM, (last visited Feb. 22, 2025), <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17969053375639897/>.

⁸⁷*The Treasure Map!*, DU BIST AM ZUG, (Jul. 30, 2022), <https://web.archive.org/web/20220808063738/https://dubistamzug.net/die-schatzkarte/>; *Dubistamzug, The Treasure Map Vol.2*, DU BIST AM ZUG (Aug. 18, 2022), <https://dubistamzug.net/die-schatzkarte-vol-2/>. We are deeply grateful to Svenja Arndt.

Its course was somewhat influenced by our personal factors and its own specific circumstances and dynamics. Yet, we believe that in spite of its specificity, our experiment delivered widely applicable insights, as will be explained below.

V. RESEARCH QUESTIONS, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Most of the questions our experiment sought to answer are of an exploratory nature, *i.e.*, without specific assumptions that the empirical data could confirm or refute. Broadly speaking, we wanted to discover what would happen if people are given the opportunity to place expressive messages of their choice in the public space. We broke down this general question into several specific points:

1. How many people will take part in *Du bist am Zug*?
2. Who will take part in the project — in terms of age, gender, origin, and occupation?
3. What kind of content will people share?
4. What will be their motivation for taking part in the project?
5. What will the participants wish to communicate with their messages?
6. What kind of reactions will the personal contributions trigger?
7. What will people think about the idea of allowing everyone to share visual messages in urban public space?

The first stage — submissions via the website — delivered data in form of the individual contributions themselves and demographic data about the participants: more than half of them (344 persons) answered all the demographic questions while making their submission, although they were optional. In addition, 313 participants left comments while submitting their contributions, providing information about the content and the background of the contributions, as well as about their motivation for taking part in the project. To gather further information, we conducted a survey after the project had been completed. In total, 131 persons took part in this survey.⁸⁸

We used simple digital methods of data analysis to analyze the quantitative data, such as age, gender, and survey questions with numerical evaluations. However, we did not use any digitalized methods to analyze the qualitative data, since its volume allowed us to make an in-depth, qualitative text and image analysis. Specifically, we used the method of grounded theory,⁸⁹ to create, complement, and amend the categorization of the obtained data. Let us illustrate how this functioned: in order to sort the submitted contributions into categories, we started

⁸⁸ German survey results, <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1IH6t3ggU6sBJV91e3unlQDviTaEovgvr0xeqxsvhJm8/edit?usp=sharing> (last visited Feb. 7, 2025); English survey results <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ZnhgLLA4iojSTTTw205HYJZ0CLbG7hSYke3ZywhP4AM/edit?usp=sharing> (last visited Feb. 7, 2025).

⁸⁹ JULIET CORBIN & ANSELM STRAUSS, *BASICS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: TECHNIQUES AND PROCEDURES FOR DEVELOPING GROUNDED THEORY* (4th ed. 2014).

observing them, trying to identify characteristics that some of them have in common. For instance, consider the following three pictures:



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

These are three photographs, but it is not entirely clear — at least at first glance — what kind of an image each of them shows. If so, they may fit together into a category of photographs displaying not immediately discernable images. Yet, the authors of the three contributions left comments that shed light on the content of their pictures:

Image 1: "With my picture of the back of a friend's head, I wanted to surprise him. Also, his hairstyle looked like the yin & yang sign because of his swirl." (here and below, all the translations of the experiment's results are our own)

Image 2: "The photo shows a Berlin ice creature . . . so to speak from the underworld. Taken on the frozen canal in Neukölln [a neighborhood in Berlin]."

Image 3: “I am a mathematician at the Technical University of Berlin and work, among other things, on conformal mappings and their discretization. The picture shows a conformal mapping of a chrysanthemum and combines mathematics and art in an impressive way.”

Given this additional information, we could assign each of these pictures to further categories. Thus, image 1 may fit into the category “photos of oneself, one’s family, and friends;” image 2 fits into the categories “photos of nature” and “contributions about Berlin;” and image 3 into the category “contributions allowing insights into one’s professional life.” Note that the assignment to a category is not exclusive, that is, one contribution may belong to several categories.

As our analysis proceeded, we redefined the already created categories to make them more precise, broke some of them down, merged others, and added new ones. We used a similar method to analyze additional qualitative data: the participants’ comments and answers to open questions in the survey.

Naturally, unlike machine-made analysis, our method involved some subjective elements: other researchers might have sorted our qualitative data differently. The advantage of the method we chose is the possibility to create categories relevant for our analysis. To give one example, no AI-based method could identify the similarity between the two following images:



Image 3



Image 4

Since image 4 shows the participant at his work, we classified both pictures as “contributions allowing insights into one’s professional life” — a category that is meaningful for our discussion, but which would have been missed in a digitalized analysis. On the other hand, AI is likely to find similarities such as stripes, dots or the prevalence of a certain color that do not add much to our understanding of what kind of content the participants chose to share. Therefore, despite the fact that an in-

depth text and image analysis inevitably involves some subjectivity, we believe that it was an adequate method to deal with our qualitative data.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To hold this paper within a reasonable scope, we will focus on the major results of our study rather than presenting them in their entirety. We will present results on the first five research questions stated above, and refer briefly to the remaining two questions.

A. How Many People Took Part in Du bist am Zug?

The submission period started on April 21 and concluded on June 5, 2022. During these six weeks, we received 771 complete contributions, and 86 additional ones that were submitted but not verified via e-mail. Considering the short period of the project, we regard this number as substantial. We believe that this number of participants may serve as a solid proof that the opportunity to place individual expressions in the public space meets significant demand. We have no particular reason to assume that this result is site- or time-specific.

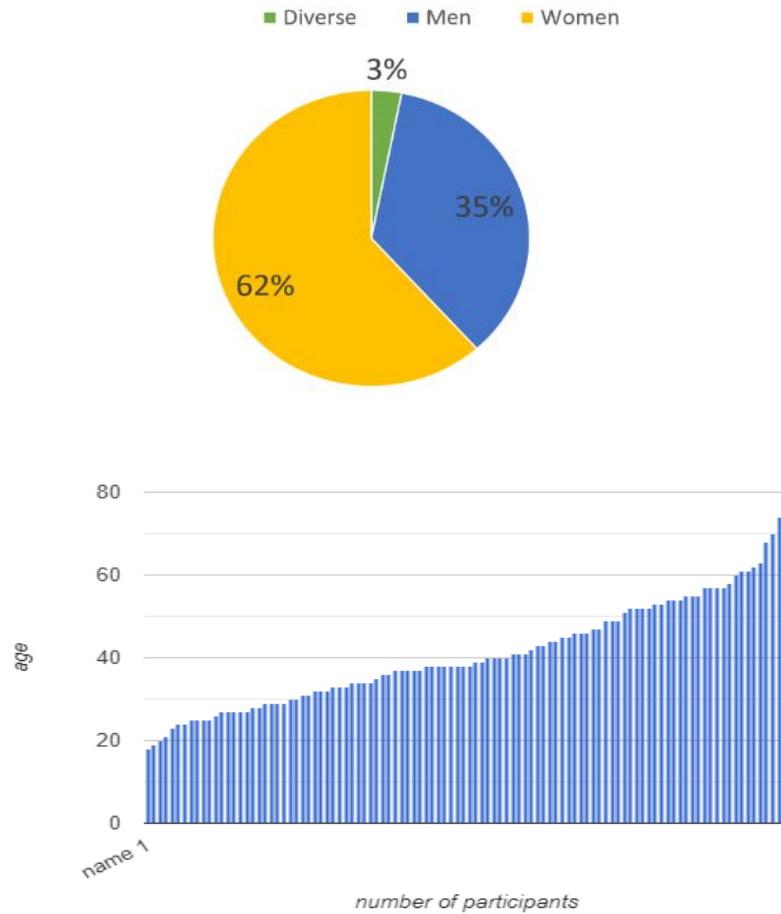
This finding has significant policy implications: if many people wish to express themselves publicly and “personalize” city streets with their individual messages, then developing tools to allow such expression would meaningfully advance both freedom of speech and the “right to the city.”

B. Who Took Part in the Project?

According to the demographic data supplied by the participants at the time of submission, roughly one third of the participants were men, two thirds were women, and three percent were of diverse gender. The percentage of people with diverse gender largely corresponds with their percentage in the general population.⁹⁰ The higher participation of women is a factor to which we do not have a clear explanation. Yet, since women’s voices are underrepresented in many contexts, the tested avenue of expression might have the benefit of increasing female presence. Yet, this result should be checked in additional experiments and on other locations to inquire whether it repeats itself.

In terms of age, the data shows a broad diversity — from 18 (which was the minimal participation age) to 77 (average 41.27). In addition, we had 32 contributions made in the name of the participants’ children, whose ages ranged from 1 to 17. As one can see in the graph below, the participation rate was quite even among the different age groups, except for people older than 60, who had a somewhat lower participation rate. This leads us to the conclusion that in future projects, one should pay special attention to the ways of involving older people and making participation more accessible to them.

⁹⁰ Martin Orth, *The Varied Republic of Germany*, DEUTSCHLAND.DE (June 21, 2024), <https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/life/diversity-in-germany-facts-and-figures>.



In terms of origin, most participants were born in Berlin and a significant further number in other German cities: overall, about three quarters of participants were of German origin. Another notable group were people from Ukraine: about five percent. We also had participants from other places, such as Austria, Switzerland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Russia, Romania, Lithuania, Moldova, the United States of America, Canada, Brazil, Mexico, Columbia, Afghanistan, China, Vietnam, Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Syria, and Rwanda.

In contrast to people from Ukraine, other minority groups living in Berlin — such as people of Turkish, Syrian, and African origin — were not sufficiently represented among the participants, although we did attempt to reach out to the respective communities. To make another comparison, the LGBT community presumably did have a significant representation — as will be shown below, equality for LGBT people was a prominent topic of the contributions. We can cautiously assume that most people behind these contributions belong to the LGBT community. These different degrees of involvement in the project appear to mirror the participation of the respective groups in the public discourse more generally. Our conclusion is that creating an opportunity for expression

does not suffice to involve the less vocal social groups. For future projects, one must consider more effective ways of reaching out to such groups.

About twenty percent of the participants indicated occupations that have to do with expression and creativity, such as artist, visual artist, designer, web designer, graphic designer, textile designer, photographer, copywriter, illustrator, journalist, and poet. Some participants indicated that this is not their main profession (e.g. “I am an amateur photographer.”). The notable number of participants, who are engaged in creative and expressive activities in their everyday lives probably has to do with the fact that such people can relatively easily decide what they would like to share publicly when given the opportunity to do so.

Apart from the remarkable participation of the various artists, people of a wide range of occupations — such as physicians, schoolteachers, salespersons, scientists, university professors, students, managers, engineers, waiters, as well as retired and unemployed persons — took part in *Du bist am Zug*. This result indicates that the desire to express oneself and be seen and heard is quite widespread and is by no means exclusive to people who have a prominent tendency towards creative activity in their everyday lives.

To sum up, our experiment has revealed a significant demand for opportunities to express oneself in urban public spaces. This demand exists among people of different age, gender, origin, and occupation. We believe that this finding is not time- or place-specific, and is likely to repeat itself in subsequent experiments.

C. What Kind of Content did People Share?

Perhaps the most interesting — and at the same time, the most worrisome — aspect of our experiment was the question what people would share once given the freedom to submit contributions of their choice. Many of our colleagues, along with potential sponsors, had expressed the concern that our website — in spite of the notice that we will not publish contributions violating German laws — would be overflowed with hate speech, pornography, or simply meaningless content.

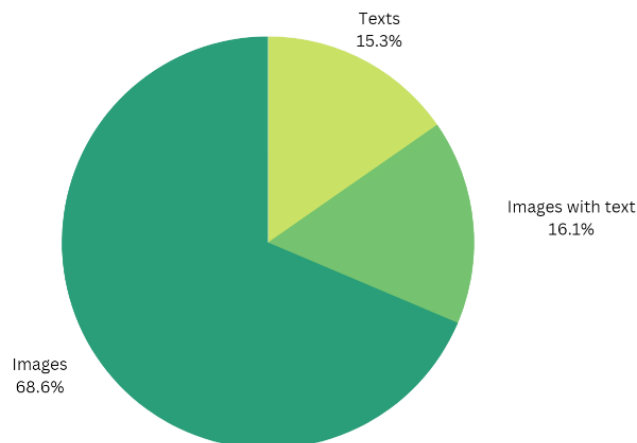
This concern has revealed itself as absolutely unfounded. Although we did have to exclude some contributions because they violated project rules (e.g. no social media usernames or no advertising) we only had one case where we had to exclude a contribution because of its objectionable content. In this case, a Ukrainian artist submitted a picture showing a doll called (in Russian) “a hero’s wife.” The doll had accessories stained with blood, and the text on the box informed that the hero’s wife can talk. The doll’s texts referred to rape and robbery of the Ukrainians by Russian soldiers, whereas one of the phrases stated: “What kind of a Russian guy would not steal anything, are you out of your mind?” This expression defamed Russian people in a way that is forbidden by the

German law.⁹¹ Accordingly, we excluded the contribution from participation in *Du bist am Zug*.



Although it is difficult to measure meaningfulness and quality in rigorous terms, we can share our feeling that the overwhelming majority of contributions were well thought-out and gave the impression that the participants made an effort to present something valuable and significant. This was the case even with the Russian doll contribution; it just went too far and crossed the line of the allowed criticism in Germany.

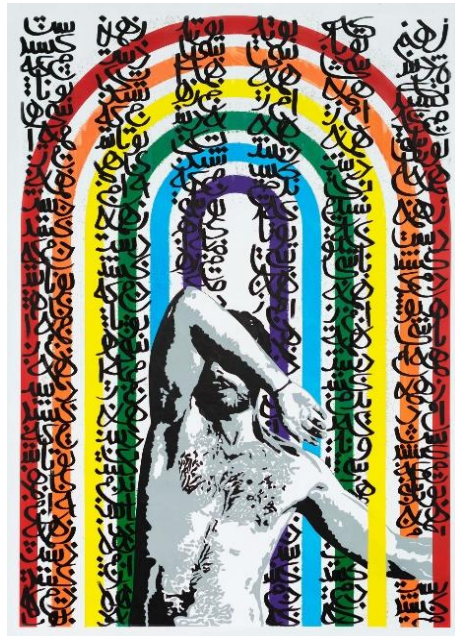
In terms of form, our website allowed submitting either images or texts, and 85% of the participants chose the image option. Yet, some images contained text as well, and these combined image-text contributions comprised 16% of submissions. Thus, 69% of the contributions were images without any text:



⁹¹ E.g., BVerfGE 93, 266 - Soldaten sind Mörder.

This finding is significant for the question of how an open democratic discourse could look if more places were given to individual speech. We can see that an absolute majority of the participants chose to use images to express themselves, and a majority chose not to use any text at all. This lends support to voices questioning the logocentric nature of the current public discourse. Indeed, given the freedom to express themselves in public spaces, most participants gave up words altogether.

A curious fact about the texts is that they were not only in German or English — languages that the participants could expect that most passersby in Berlin understand — but also in Ukrainian, Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Georgian, Kurdish, Hebrew, French, and even medieval Persian:



This contribution incorporates a love poem by Saadi Shīrāzī, a Persian poet of the medieval period: “I gave up on everyone so that you are all me.” The poem is written in calligraphy; it repeats many times.⁹²

One might speculate that sometimes, the aspect of self-expression and presence is more significant than the perception by others — at least in the context of expression in public spaces. We will return to this point later.

In terms of the topics the contributions touched upon, we will present here the six largest categories that we identified: (a) creativity;

⁹² We are thankful to Fati Masjedi for the identification of the poem and its translation.

(b) photographs of nature, animals, and cityscapes; (c) political messages; (d) glimpses into personal worlds; (e) Berlin, and; (f) inspiration, greetings, compliments, and advice. Almost all the submitted contributions fall at least under one of the six categories. As mentioned above, these categories are non-exclusive.

a. Creativity

In this category, we included contributions that reveal the participants' creativity: drawings and paintings made in various techniques, collages of various kinds, art installations, digital artworks, sculptures, poems, self-made designs and a self-made costume, as well as photographs showing the participants dancing, signing, playing musical instruments or performing. This category is by far the largest of all, comprising 425 contributions, roughly two thirds of all. Here are several examples of how these contributions looked as posters:



Tobias Lück

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WALL



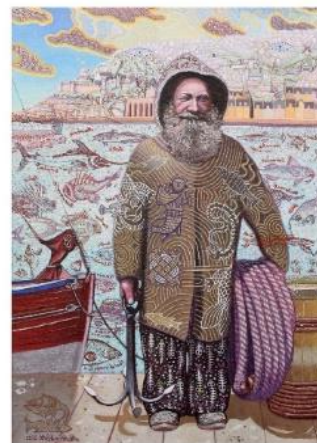
Jochen Schlick

#DUBISTAMZUG
WALL



Helga Wimmer

#DUBISTAMZUG
WALL



nobilitate.M a(n)A

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WALL



Simon Lüttmann



Michael Jespersen

#DUBISTAMZUG



#DUBISTAMZUG



Alexander Rieck

#DUBISTAMZUG



Britta Lafleur

#DUBISTAMZUG



c. Political messages

This category also included 132 contributions. A significant number of political messages promoted equality in general or objected to specific types of discrimination — most notably, the discrimination of LGBT people, but also of women, as well as sick, disabled, mentally ill, introverted, and overweight persons. In addition, we received contributions aiming to make specific illnesses — such as diabetes and depression — more visible. We had an especially remarkable number of

people suffering from an illness called ME/CFS,⁹³ who are a rather well-organized group fighting for prominence and recognition.



*Human dignity is
inviolable.
Nowhere is stated
“up to size M.”*

STELL DIR VOR, DEIN LEBEN IST VORBEI.
ABER DU BIST NOCH DA.



#DUBISTAMZUG

*Imagine your life is
over. But you are still
around.*

⁹³ See *ME/CFS Basics*, CDC, <https://www.cdc.gov/me-cfs/index.html> (last visited May 10, 2024).

Additional prominent topics included environmental protection and animal rights, as well as anti-war messages — some objecting war and promoting peace generally, but most referring specifically to the war in Ukraine.



One heart for all creatures

*I can see into
the future! ...
but there is no
future!*



We will always be free

d. Glimpses into personal worlds

In this category, we included contributions allowing a glimpse into the personal worlds of the participants. This category is almost as large as the previous two, totaling 125 contributions. We received pictures of the participants, their families, friends, and pets, as well as pictures of intimate domestic environments — for instance, showing children’s toys or baby’s hands and dog’s paws. Some participants sent in personal stories — among them stories of illnesses, sexual abuse, experiences of war and refuge, but also positive experiences, such as finding love or a new home. Others sent messages to specific persons, for instance, a message expressing gratitude to a relative who had influenced the participant’s path of life, encouragement for the participant’s disabled daughter, a poem in memory of the participant’s deceased grandmother, and two marriage proposals. In addition, many participants shared paintings and other artworks of their children.



Cloud Cakloo

#DUBISTAMZUG



Dirk Jericho

#DUBISTAMZUG



Giulmaz Sagitova

#DUBISTAMZUG



Rajsh 12

#DUBISTAMZUG





Laubi, will you marry me?

A notable group of contributions incorporated both, glimpses into one's personal world and political messages:



*My name is Sandra. I suffer
from the severe disease
Myalgic Enzophamomyitis -
#mecfs. I am a mom of
three sick children. We are
in desperate need of
research. Please help us
publicize the disease. It is a
neuroimmunological
multisystem disease.*

*I am an artist in exile and
cannot work here!*

Я заснула 24 лютого і не
можу прокинутись. Це
найстрашніший сон з усіх, що
я бачила. Допоможіть

Viktoria Korotko



*I fell asleep on
February 24 and
can't wake up. This
is the worst dream
I've ever had. Please
help.*

e. Berlin

The fifth category consists of 61 contributions dedicated to the city of Berlin, which make about 10% of all contributions. We received pictures of different places and from various historical periods of Berlin, along with collages on the topic (mostly incorporating the famous TV Tower). Participants also shared poems dedicated to Berlin, texts about their love to this city, about how it connects people, makes everyone feel at home, as well as about how diverse, unconventional, and inclusive it is.



Thomas Bulgrin



Julia Zakharov





Conny Wischhusen

Die Stadt ist ein Ort der Vielfalt und der Kreativität. Hier werden neue Ideen geboren und neue Wege gefunden. Berlin ist eine Stadt, die sich ständig verändert und weiterentwickelt. Hier ist die Zukunft.

#DUBISTAMZUG



Kateryna Yesipova

Die Stadt ist ein Ort der Vielfalt und der Kreativität. Hier werden neue Ideen geboren und neue Wege gefunden. Berlin ist eine Stadt, die sich ständig verändert und weiterentwickelt. Hier ist die Zukunft.

#DUBISTAMZUG



Sabrina Blumenthal

Die Stadt ist ein Ort der Vielfalt und der Kreativität. Hier werden neue Ideen geboren und neue Wege gefunden. Berlin ist eine Stadt, die sich ständig verändert und weiterentwickelt. Hier ist die Zukunft.

#DUBISTAMZUG



Wenige sind hier geboren,
viele aber fühlen sich als Berliner.
Nur Berlin verbindet...
Ein Gefühl, viele Menschen.

Christoph Drees

Die Stadt ist ein Ort der Vielfalt und der Kreativität. Hier werden neue Ideen geboren und neue Wege gefunden. Berlin ist eine Stadt, die sich ständig verändert und weiterentwickelt. Hier ist die Zukunft.

#DUBISTAMZUG



*Few are born here, but many
feel like Berliners.
Only Berlin connects...
One feeling, many people.*

f. Inspiration, greetings, compliments, and advice

The last category included 50 messages aimed at greeting, as well as giving inspiration, compliments, and advice. Several contributions in this category related to taking time, living the moment, and perceiving the current point in time as the right one. Others included greetings, such as wishing a good day or asking “how are you?” Further contributions advised to have courage, patience, and solidarity, to fulfill small dreams instead of running after big ones, to tolerate grey tones, and even to

pickle cucumbers. In this category, we also included inspirational quotes, such as “Do not be afraid of the stupid who know nothing, be afraid of the smart who feel nothing” (Erich Kästner) and “One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.” (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry).



Nod Eto

#DUBISTAMZUG



#DUBISTAMZUG



*Time is always there.
We only have to take it!*

Legen Sie Gurken ein.



Birgit Kunz & Mona Schmidke

Angelo Favia

#DUBISTAMZUG



#DUBISTAMZUG



Pickle cucumbers.

contributions. This finding is significant. It indicates that the visions of cultural democracy (where everybody gets a chance to become co-creator rather than a mere consumer of art) are viable. Comparing the number of people who submitted artworks (about 66%) with the number of people who identified themselves as artists of some kind (about 20%) makes clear that many people without artistic training wish to create and share artworks.

We can say that our experiment reveals a major social demand for co-creation of art. Economic models usually focus on consumption as the goal of market regulation (e.g. supply should adjust itself to meet the demand). Yet, we believe that in the field of art, this perception is out of place, for several reasons. First, as discussed above, much of the artistic field is dominated by experts, who decide what will be displayed in museums, galleries, and urban public spaces. This gives many people the impression that they do not understand art, which indicates that today's artistic world does not obey the market rules of supply adjusting itself to demand. Second, even if we focus on the market-based aspect of today's artistic world, it does not seem to capture the whole picture in this field.

Contrary to other producers — and contrary to the assumption of copyright laws — economic gain is not always the main motivation behind creative activity and behind the desire to share one's creativity.⁹⁴ Our experiment provides evidence that people wish to present their artworks without expectation of a monetary gain. If so, we can say that the opportunity to present one's artwork is in itself a subject of demand. Thus, our findings indicate that the current structure of the artistic world — where only few individuals have the opportunity to present their works to the public — does not reflect the real need for sharing one's creativity. We will revisit this point below, while discussing the motivation of the project's participants to share their art.

Another interesting finding is the modest place (about one-fifth of the contributions) dedicated to politics. This stands in a sharp contrast to today's highly politicized social discourse. An overwhelming majority of the contributions did not have any statement to agree or disagree with — indeed, few counter-arguments can be raised against a picture of a cat. When given an opportunity to present a contribution of their choice, most people chose to share content that marks them out as individuals — whether by a work of art, a personal story, or a picture they took — rather than signals their belonging to a certain political group. We thus believe that de-centralizing public discourse by allowing significant room for individual speech has the potential to blur the social division into “political tribes” and to de-polarize the social discourse.

As mentioned above, Talisse suggests that desaturating the social environment of politics could help us regain the ability to regard our co-citizens as people with valuable aspirations and pursuits that lie beyond politics. We believe that letting individual speech co-shape public

⁹⁴ E.g., JESSICA SILBEY, *THE EUREKA MYTH: CREATORS, INNOVATORS, AND EVERYDAY INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY* (2015); Rebecca Tushnet, *Economies of Desire: Fair Use and Marketplace Assumptions*, 51 WM. & MARY L. REV. 513, 520–22 (2009).

discourses could be a significant step in that direction. *Du bist am Zug* demonstrates that given the opportunity to express themselves individually, people show diverse sides of themselves: they express their creativity and aspirations; invite others into their personal and professional worlds; show landscapes and animals they observed; share their reflections and wishes. Thus, individual expressions could re-build the democratic discourse around a great variety of new topics, thereby enriching and de-polarizing our society.

Moreover, the political discourse itself has much to gain from individual speech. As mentioned above, scholars have proposed introducing visual and rhetorical tools — such as images and storytelling — into the democratic discourse. These tools could foster imagination and create empathy, thereby helping to overcome the difficulty of attending and appreciating perspectives that contradict one's political views. Indeed, participants that chose to present political messages did just that. As the examples above illustrate, they conveyed these messages in creative and personal ways, using pictures, rhetoric, and telling their personal stories.

We believe that this type of communication has the potential to create greater understanding and mend the common basis for political discourse. For instance, consider a statement touching upon the debate on migration, which is a highly polarizing topic in current German politics: “I am an artist in exile and cannot work here.” The personal component of this statement may reach into hearts of those who are generally opposed to migration. Similarly, the words “I fell asleep on February 24 and can't wake up. This is the worst dream I've ever had. Please help.” have the potential to evoke empathy and understanding on another highly debated topic — the role of Germany in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

An additional positive aspect for political discourse is bringing in new topics (the most notable example in our experiment was ME/CFS illness) and highlighting less prominent ones — for instance, discrimination of overweight people and animal abuse. Apart from the importance of including underrepresented interests in the public debate, these topics have a depolarizing potential. Since they do not stand in the center of hot political debates, “political tribes” do not have strong opinions about them; consequently, they might give rise to “cross-tribal” connections.

Apart from these positive effects, we believe that there is something essentially democratic about letting people decide on the very question of what topics should be included in the public debate, and to what extent. Today, the social discourse largely consists of a given list of political topics, and most people are able to express their opinions on these topics either in private conversation or on the social media. In both cases, they will usually be heard by like-minded individuals. Their participation in public debate primarily takes the indirect form of voting for politicians who represent their views on the topics included in the political arena. Letting people decide individually what topics should

belong in the public sphere would build up this sphere anew, in a way that is much closer to a genuinely free democratic discourse.

To sum up, our results point out that the social discourse might look different if people had the opportunity to take part in it individually, rather than as a part of large groups as happens now. Much space would be dedicated to artistic expression. People would have many opportunities to get a glimpse into the personal worlds of their co-citizens. Politics will occupy a smaller place than it does today, and the political discourse itself would take different, presumably less polarizing forms.

D. What was the Participants' Motivation for Taking Part in the Project?

a. Results

Our survey included the following question: "Why did you choose to participate in *Du bist am Zug*?" The most frequent reason given by the participants was that they liked the idea of the project — this motivation appeared in 47 out of the 131 answers. Some of the respondents simply stated: "because I liked the idea," "awesome project," "exciting campaign," and the like, while others explained what they liked about the project. The main aspects the participants mentioned in this context were giving everyone a chance to be seen, filling public space with art, and replacing advertising:

- It's a great idea to give all Berlin residents an equal chance to share their work – whatever it may be – with the city, thus granting many people an opportunity to be seen that they might otherwise never have had.
- A super great idea! To flood the city with art & artistic content - what could be better?! Thank you very much for that.
- Because I found it a charming idea to decorate public space not only with advertising, but with something that brings us forward socially and culturally. The world is more than just an advertising pillar for corporations.

Several respondents remarked that they wanted to support the idea of the project by their participation, so that the project succeeds and repeats itself.

The second most frequently mentioned motivation (45 answers) was using the chance to present something of one's own to the public — oneself, one's artwork, one's thoughts, something personal, one's problem, or something that one likes. Here are some examples:

- I wanted to share my favorite quote with Berlin!
- It appealed to me to show the way I see Berlin to others.

Some of the respondents emphasized that *Du bist am Zug* was perhaps their only chance to share something with a broad audience:

- I found it a unique experience to be able to exhibit something in Berlin that means so much to me personally.

Others noted that this was the first time they dared to present their artworks to an audience:

- I wanted to see if art of a non-professional would be selected for a billboard and to dare to appear in public with my art.
- I wanted to dare to share my writings and to take a big step in my favorite city.
- I am a creative person and produce many things, but usually do not dare to post or show the results anywhere. I give away the pictures, sewn or crafted things only for birthdays to my friends. With *Du bist am Zug*, I could just quietly and secretly dare to take my chance.

In the third largest group (25 answers), participants referred to their wish to make public spaces genuinely public and democratic, to actively design the city — together with others — as well as to become present, heard and, visible:

- I wanted to be heard.
- I found the idea of being visible in the street with something of mine exciting....
- I enjoyed the thought that my photos could be seen by many people.
- I found it great to be able to contribute my part in the design of the public space through my creativity.
- I liked the idea of returning the public space to the society.
- I enjoyed being a part of the public co-creation.
- For the democratization of public space, which should belong to all of us.
- Designing the city together!

Somewhat relatedly, the fourth type of motivation (14 answers) was filling the public space with art. Some participants specifically remarked that they would like art to replace commercial and political messages in the public space:

- I hate advertising, because it is so often successful with me – and was so happy to turn these countless private surfaces into a public realm and an art exhibition.
- It is a wonderful way to make art visible in public space – to inspire people, to bring a spark of beauty and poetry into their hearts, rather than overwhelming them with fear-mongering messages or consumerist advertisements as is often the case.
- I really wanted to take part in the campaign against visual pollution.

In the fifth group, 13 answers reflected the wish to see one's contribution in large in public space:

- The idea of seeing a picture of mine on a billboard in Berlin made me happy.
- Because it was a great idea to see your own photo in such a big print as part of the streetscape.

Other types of motivation we indicated formed smaller groups (2 to 7 answers). They were: trying something new, an occasion to undertake

a creative project, to see if one can make it and if the project will really function without a jury or professional judgement. Notably, only two participants mentioned that they were interested in reactions to their contributions.

b. Discussion

The motivations of the project's participants — democratizing public space, showing one's art and one's presence, beautifying the city, and replacing commercial messages — are very much reminiscent of those of graffiti writers. This lends support to the assumption that graffiti is a symptom of a larger phenomenon: a significant number of people share the wish to become visible in public space and to co-design the shared visual environment. It was especially interesting to see that many participants felt that taking part in the project would “democratize” public spaces, and return them to where they belong: the society. These results suggest that developing tools for personal expression in public space could fill in the vague concept of “right to the city” with meaningful content.

Another notable aspect here is the small number of participants that indicated their interest in receiving reactions. Presence, visibility, and the possibility to take part in the design of one's own city seem to be valuable in themselves, regardless of other people's feedback. Legal theories recognize several rationales for protecting speech, one of which is self-expression: an opportunity to speak one's mind, to express one's creativity may significantly contribute to the development of one's personality.⁹⁵ The respondents' motivations indicate that this speaker-focused — rather than perceiver-oriented — aspect of speech might be decisive in our context. It is important to create space for speech that would be seen and heard regardless of the number of supporters it has or the reactions it triggers; of course, this is not to suggest that incitement or hate speech should be allowed. Speech in public has intrinsic value for the speaker, which should serve as a sufficient basis for developing avenues for publicly visible expression.

This observation has a special implication for the field of art — a significant number of the respondents indicated their wish to present their artworks, to turn the city into an art exhibition, and to contribute their art to the visual urban design. This should motivate us to think anew about the field of art. We should ask ourselves whether it is necessary to have a highly exclusionist art world, in which experts or/and the market single out a small number of individuals as “artists” to the exclusion of all those who wish to engage in artistic activity and present their works to a broad audience. Our findings suggest that today's artistic world is too much viewer-oriented: art is defined by experts or the market. If some aspects of the artistic creation — which is an important part of human flourishing — are fulfilled when the works are presented to a

⁹⁵ OXFORD HANDBOOK OF FREEDOM OF SPEECH xiii (Adrienne Stone & Frederick Schauer eds., 2021).

broad audience, this might provide a valuable reason to rebuild the artistic world in a more artist-oriented way.

One could imagine another art world, in which everyone may have an outlet and audience for his or her creativity. For the sake of comparison, advertising occupies our attention without enjoying the status of art or demand. The omnipresence of commercial messages compels city inhabitants to perceive them, in spite of the widespread wish to avoid them. Meanwhile, commercial interests seem to provide a weaker basis for a right to occupy our attention than the desire of our co-citizens to share their art with us.

E. What did the Participants Wish to Communicate with their Messages?

a. Results

In our survey, we asked: “Tell us about your contribution — why did you choose it and what did you want to communicate?” Many participants gave lengthy answers to this question, and we classified these texts according to the main themes.

The largest category (31 answers) reflected the desire to bring something positive into other people’s lives. Participants told about their aspiration to arouse positive emotions, bring in some color into everyday life, send positive messages, spark phantasy, make other people smile and laugh, as well as to communicate hope, love, happiness, inner peace, and tranquility. Four respondents specifically noted their wish to inspire the passerby to experience the beauty of everyday moments. Four additional answers reflected the intention to encourage people to think positively about others and not to lose sight of those who are dear to them. Further answers in this category expressed wishes to give a compliment, reassure, motivate and support the viewers, to inspire them to challenge their inner limits and achieve greater freedom — “to spread their wings” — and to encourage them to feel good about themselves no matter what others think:

- I have chosen a work called "komplimentedusche" [compliment shower], which conveys to the viewer a compliment that has nothing to do with the external appearance.



Miriam Martin

„Das Projekt ist ein Projekt, bei dem wir die Möglichkeit haben, unsere Kunst zu zeigen und unsere Botschaft zu verbreiten. Wir hoffen, dass es eine Inspiration für andere Künstlerinnen und Künstler sein wird.“

#DUBISTAMZUG



To be with you is like a holiday.

The second and the third categories we identified both consisted of 24 answers. The answers in the second category reflected the desire to show one's artistic work. The answers included phrases such as “I wanted to show my art” or “I wanted to present my art in the city,” “I wanted to show my artistic work to a large audience,” “I wanted to share my poetry,” “I wanted to show my artistic skills,” or “I wanted to show what I can.”

- I wanted to make people curious about my work and about the work of my collectives (dancers, choreographers, embroiderers from Africa, Europe and the crisis areas of Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Syria, etc.).



Elisabeth Mase

„Das Projekt ist ein Projekt, bei dem wir die Möglichkeit haben, unsere Kunst zu zeigen und unsere Botschaft zu verbreiten. Wir hoffen, dass es eine Inspiration für andere Künstlerinnen und Künstler sein wird.“

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In the third category, we had answers reporting the wish to share something personal — personal experiences and feelings, as well as things or beings that have special significance for the participants. Twelve answers related to personal experiences, six of them specifically to experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, for instance:

- During the gloomy Corona time with the hard lockdowns, when everything was closed, my friends and I made an art exhibition in a vineyard. . . .
- It was a photo of me at the end of 2020 after the hard Corona year, which I used to get a maximum of fitness, so managed to get into the best physical shape of mine at the age of 42. . . .



Elias Kouloures

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#DUBISTAMZUG

Republik und Gesellschaften
Wall

An additional six answers about personal experiences related to recurring events — such as receiving offensive remarks about one's illness, having to cope with male-dominated or homophobic world, or finding comfort in one's religion — as well as to specific events in the past, for instance, as a trip, a concert, or a show:

- I am a type 1 diabetic, and have to hear repeatedly what strange and hurtful prejudices people have about the disease. I wanted to stop that.

Further, seven answers in this category referred to sharing something the participants especially liked: one's favorite song (its title), a picture of one's favorite bird, a favorite building, musical instruments the participants played and wished to introduce to the others, as well as the respondents' enthusiasm about certain artistic styles:

- I wanted to show everyone how beautiful the Turkish guitar (saz) is. The instrument is still relatively unknown.



- Hagen is severely multiply disabled, and has difficulties with hand motor skills. He has painted “Mama” in one of his favorite colors. For him and us a masterpiece that we would like more people to see.



The fourth category included 20 answers that had a message about Berlin. Most of them were messages about how colorful, diverse, inclusive and beautiful it is. In addition, one participant had a critical message:

- Plastic bag in the wind on the Tempelhof field. The seemingly aesthetic image condemns garbage in Berlin.



Anke Hohnmeister

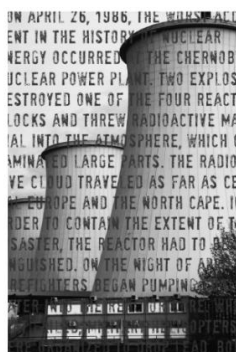
Die hier gezeigten Bilder zeigen (Fotografieren) nicht nur die Umweltverschmutzung, sondern auch die Folgen der Klimawandel. Die hier gezeigten Bilder zeigen (Fotografieren) nicht nur die Umweltverschmutzung, sondern auch die Folgen der Klimawandel. Die hier gezeigten Bilder zeigen (Fotografieren) nicht nur die Umweltverschmutzung, sondern auch die Folgen der Klimawandel.

#DUBISTAMZUG



The fifth category included seventeen answers about one's intention to share political and social messages. Six of them were anti-war messages, all referring, more or less directly to the ongoing war in Ukraine:

- With my contribution, I wanted to tell about the current events in Ukraine.
- My photo showed a still unrestored facade of a building that was damaged by bombs and shells. Much has to be done yet to repair all the damage caused by war, and there is already another war in Europe. I am thinking about it since February.
- It is the day of the nuclear accident in Chernobyl and at the same time, there are acute problems with nuclear power stations in the context of the war in Ukraine. I wanted to sensitize people to this topic, since there are many social decisions to be made, especially in Germany.



Svenja Arndt

Die hier gezeigten Bilder zeigen (Fotografieren) nicht nur die Umweltverschmutzung, sondern auch die Folgen der Klimawandel. Die hier gezeigten Bilder zeigen (Fotografieren) nicht nur die Umweltverschmutzung, sondern auch die Folgen der Klimawandel. Die hier gezeigten Bilder zeigen (Fotografieren) nicht nur die Umweltverschmutzung, sondern auch die Folgen der Klimawandel.

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Three further answers referred to environmental protection, and the rest to specific problems that the participants wished to make visible, such as their illnesses, lack of social acceptance of gay people, insufficient respect and payment for illustrator's work, and the need to adopt street dogs:

- I painted the picture during my outing. Actually, the picture communicates my subjective feelings at that time. Ultimately, however, it says that even today, it can be difficult for queer people to show publicly whom they love.

The sixth category consisted of twelve answers, referring to the participants' wish to share their reflections and to motivate others to reflect — generally or upon specific topics, such as love or the vulnerability of our world:

- My contribution . . . reflects that we all need shelter, warmth, and compassion.
- I want to show that it is possible to transform horror into beauty, and that it is possible to be both tough and delicate at the same time
- Our Legacy - A plastic bag and a loaf of bread, that's what we leave behind. . . . A plastic dystopia.



Peter Reinert

Da hier gerade etwas von einer Plastikmüllschleife zu sehen ist, werden wir hier ein kleines Gedächtnis an die Person, die es so schön gemacht hat, zeigen. Wir hoffen, dass es Ihnen ein wenig Freude macht und Sie sich für die Kunst und die Umwelt interessieren. Wir hoffen, dass Sie sich für die Kunst und die Umwelt interessieren.

#DUBISTAMZUG

Initiative für Kunst und Umwelt

Wall

- I took a picture of colorful rubber shoes sold in southeast Turkey. These are worn there in the streets as well. People don't choose them by the designer or leather type, but only by size and, at best, by color. What seems as self-evident to us does not apply everywhere in the world.



Manuela Hubner

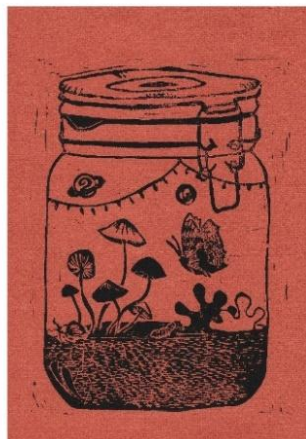
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Region Wall

The seventh category consisted of seven answers. They are especially interesting; the participants told that they did not wish to communicate anything specific, just to share something beautiful, cool, or poetic:

- A poetic occurrence without explanation.
- My picture combines my favorite medium and my favorite motif: linocut and mushrooms. It has no special intention; it is simply beautiful.



Annicka Fröhling

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The last category consists of two answers reflecting the motivation to connect to other people through one's contribution.

b. Discussion

Perhaps the most interesting finding here is the willingness to share something with everyone, rather than to reach out to one's own, or any specific group. This might indicate that individual communication tends to be less polarizing and thus has the potential to create more inclusive bases for social communication. The largest category we indicated — positive messages — gives another reason for optimism. Indeed, the extensive willingness to bring something positive, beautiful, and cheerful into other people's lives is one of the most promising findings our experiment delivered. It suggests that remodeling the social discourse to allow space for individual expression could considerably improve its atmosphere.

Another significant finding is further evidence about the substantial interest to present one's art to a broad audience. It reinforces our conclusion that there is significant demand for opportunities to exhibit one's art, and lends support to voices calling to democratize the artistic field, allowing everyone to co-create our shared culture. It is interesting to note that the participants only referred to their wish to share their artistic works, and did not mention any anticipation of feedback. This might further indicate the need to remodel the art world in a more artist- rather than consumer- or expert-oriented way.

Another interesting finding is the willingness to share highly personal content, such as one's experiences and feelings, memories of one's lost loved ones or a work of one's disabled child. This may indicate how differently social discourse might look if more space would be given to individual expression. While social discourse saturated with politics reduces people to their affiliation with one of rival "tribes," many of *Du bist am Zug*'s participants chose to expose unique and distinctive dimensions of their personalities and lives.

As mentioned above, the significant number of Berlin-related messages might be site-specific. This finding is nevertheless remarkable and can provide an interesting point of comparison for similar projects in other cities. It could be interesting to explore where people are more likely to communicate city-related messages, and what kind of city-related messages people communicate, and try to discover the interconnection between these tendencies and other city-related factors.

As for political messages, we can again witness the presence of topics that are absent from the regular political discourse — for instance, not-much-discussed illnesses, working conditions of illustrators, and adoption of street dogs. This provides an indication that individual expressions have the potential of broadening the political discourse and making it more fine-tuned. The same might be said about contributions inviting the passerby to reflect on certain topics, such as the vulnerability of our world, that these contributions referred to issues that are rarely debated. In addition to enriching the public discourse, reflecting upon

such issues may somewhat move the discourse away from highly disputed topics, thus potentially weakening the current social polarization.

A lesson we have learnt from the current project is that an opportunity to get access to the participants' comments could have improved it. As the examples above illustrate, some contributions incorporate meanings that are difficult to grasp without the author's explanation.

Finally, participants who answered that they did not wish to communicate anything give some further indication about the breadth the social discourse could have if co-shaped by individual speech. Such discourse would not only embrace a great variety of topics, but also include expressive speech non-reducible to any specific topic at all.

F. Some Impressions from Additional Results

The scope of this paper does not permit presenting all the results of our study. Yet, we would like to share, very briefly, our impressions about some of the additional results we have obtained from the survey.

We asked the participants about the reactions they received to their contributions, and how they made them feel. The answers made clear that our project was not built to allow meaningful interactions with strangers; most of the respondents reported that they have received reactions of friends and family, or superficial social media reactions, such as likes, emojis and general praise, or did not receive any reactions at all. Only a minority of the respondents told about meaningful discussions on the social media or interaction with the passerby in the street. Nevertheless, most respondents shared that their experience with the project was very positive; merely seeing one's contribution in large on a visible public spot and knowing that other people see it made the participants feel happy, excited, and proud. Many remarked that it was not important for them whether they received reactions or not. What mattered was that they could present themselves and their messages in a way that reaches other people.

An additional curious finding in this context is the answers to the following question: "Do you agree with the following statement: 'Letting people place their expressions on billboards creates meaningful communication?'" Sixty-four per cent of the respondents answered that they agree or strongly agree with this statement. This gives a clear indication that people do not necessarily perceive communication as something mutual, something that requires a reaction — meaningful communication may consist of sending one's message without expecting any answer.

This led us to reflect on the question whether the lack of meaningful possibility to comment on the contributions and interact with their authors was a drawback or a feature of our project. Communication without interaction gives the speaker a special position, allowing to send a clear and undisturbed message. Indeed, this is the way mass media (television, press, and radio) function, along with traditional forms of

artistic presentation (shows, movies, concerts, and exhibitions). For the sake of comparison, consider “legal walls” where graffiti is allowed. Everyone is free to write and paint on these walls, and one’s painting may be modified and complemented by others. While this may create a playground for interaction, this may also dilute the expressiveness of individual messages. While presenting personal messages on billboards does not allow interaction, it has the advantage of preserving the power of individual voices. Additional experiments, with modified conditions, are needed to explore the benefits and drawbacks of interactive and non-interactive speech.

The last findings we would like to mention is respondents’ reactions to contributions shared by other participants. First, an absolute majority of the respondents (74%) stated that they looked at many other people’s contributions.⁹⁶ To the question of whether they learnt something new and if so, what it was, the most frequent answers were that one learnt how diverse, creative, and talented one’s co-citizens were — many noted that this surprised and even overwhelmed them. “Everyone is an artist in one’s own way,” commented one respondent. Only two respondents remarked that they found the quality of some of the artworks too low. These findings provide an initial indication that people may understand and value art that has neither been approved by experts nor created by famous artists. This lends further support to the viability of ideas of cultural democracy.

Another significant group of respondents remarked that they learnt how much their co-citizens’ had to share, how great their need to share was, and how important such sharing was to (re)gain a sense of community. An additional recurrent answer was that insights in the personal worlds of others created a feeling of belonging and being together. Some respondents noted that the contributions inspired them, triggered emotions, gave food for thought, and broadened their horizon. Finally, many respondents noticed that they learnt about an illness they had been not aware of, and understood that it needs recognition and research.

These findings provide initial reference points for the potential of social discourse based on individual speech to foster social understanding, empathy, and a sense of community. Yet, these are initial insights into the experiment’s results. Comprehensive analysis will be presented in future publications.

CONCLUSION & OUTLOOK

This paper presented the results of the experiment we conducted in March–August 2022 in the public space of Berlin. The goal of this experiment was to test a novel tool of democratic participation: individual speech. The results of our experiment provide initial evidence as to the possible functioning of the proposed tool.

⁹⁶ On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is “not at all” and 5 is “yes, a lot,” 72 out of the 131 respondents answered “5” and 25 answered “4.”

Our experiment revealed a significant desire — shared by people of different ages, genders, ethnicities, and occupations — to be visible in urban public space, and to co-design their city. We observed that, given an opportunity to submit content of their choice, an absolute majority of the participants shared images rather than texts. Some of the shared images incorporated texts, but most contained no words at all. This finding lends support to voices criticizing the logocentric culture and arguing that the social discourse should put greater emphasis on non-verbal expressive tools instead of focusing on rational argumentation.

In terms of content, most of the submitted contributions consisted of artworks of various kinds — such as paintings, drawings, collages, digital artworks, photographs, and poetry. By contrast, a relatively modest portion of submissions contained political messages. Additional significant categories of contributions included glimpses into the personal worlds of the participants, as well as wishes, inspiration, greetings, and advice. Many participants indicated that their motivation was to present themselves, some aspects of their lives, or their art. Others wished to bring in something positive — such as encouragement, beauty or poetry — into other people’s lives.

These results give a sense of how differently the social discourse might look if significant space were dedicated to individual expression. One can speculate that less place would be occupied by politics, more by art and creativity; people would present unique and distinctive aspects of their personalities rather than being reduced to their affiliation with one of the “political tribes;” and we would see more messages that seek to bring in something positive into other people’s lives. This leads us to believe that the tested democratic tool has the potential of desaturating the public discourse of politics, depolarizing it, and enriching it with new dimensions and horizons.

As for political messages submitted by the participants, most of them had personal and/or creative elements, and some of them touched upon subjects that are rarely debated, such as specific illnesses, discrimination of overweight people, or the need to adopt street dogs. We believe that these characteristics witness the ability of individual speech to expand the boundaries of the political debate, as well as to enrich it with elements evoking empathy and triggering the imagination.

All this data points out the potential of individual speech to contribute to depolarization of the social discourse, to create new bases for interconnectedness and thus help to “mend” democracy. Indeed, many respondents reported that the insights into the personal worlds of their co-citizens gave them a feeling of community and belonging.

Another significant finding of our experiment was the substantial number of participants, who reported their wish to co-design and beautify the shared visual space with their contributions, as well as their sentiment that in this way, they took part in “democratizing” the public space and returning it to the public, where it should belong. This indicates the potential of the proposed tool to advance the residents’

“right to the city” — which currently constitutes a rather vague concept — in a meaningful way.

Finally, an important finding of our experiment is the little weight the participants attached to reactions of others to their contributions, or the lack thereof. Our results reveal that the opportunity to be present, to show something of one’s own in urban public space, may be significant in itself, regardless of the others’ response. This finding indicates that creating opportunities for everyone to express oneself in a way that reaches an audience may significantly advance one’s freedom of speech. This finding has a particular significance in the field of art. It lends support to the ideas of cultural democracy and suggests that remodeling the artistic world in a more artist- rather than consumer- and expert-oriented way — that is, allowing everyone to co-design our shared culture — is in demand. This conclusion is supported by the evidence that a great number of the respondents enjoyed and admired the artworks submitted by *Du bist am Zug*’s participants, although these were neither made by famous artists nor approved by experts.

These are the conclusions we drew from the experiment. *Du bist am Zug* was a first attempt to test individual speech as a novel democratic tool. Further experiments — *inter alia*, in different locations and with modified conditions — are required to explore the feasibility of this tool further. Will the results replicate themselves in other locations or at another point in time in Berlin? Would creating avenues for communication with the authors of contributions improve the results? How would the experiment function in highly contested locations, such as Jerusalem — a divided and tense city? How would it function with a different medium of expression — for instance, posters on buses or trains, instead of billboards? In addition, we can assume that people who took part in our project were biased in its favor. It would be interesting to explore in further experiments what people who do not take part in projects of this kind think about them. These and many other questions remain to be explored in subsequent experiments.

