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EXPERIMENT IN EXPERIENCING THE CITY

EKSPERYMENT ODCZUWANIA MIASTA

Abstract

This paper concerns the value of the experiment, understood as one of the aims of the avant-garde. The academic experiment presented was to demonstrate whether it is possible to experience a city and its transformations via an exhibition of photographs of that city. Can the manner of exhibiting photographs have an impact on their interpretation – an exhibition at a gallery or online?

Three research methods were used in this study – cognitive methods based on experiencing photographic images of cities during an exhibition at an art gallery and viewing an online exhibition, as well as sociological surveys. In this manner, the initial hypothesis as to whether it is possible to experience a city through its photographs displayed at an exhibition, was proved. The preferred form was a stationary exhibition, although online exhibitions do have their value and a range of benefits, especially during a period when social contact is restricted, which was necessary during the pandemic.

The study's findings are significant not only from the standpoint of academic value but can also be used in practice so as to enhance the exhibition of artworks, including photographs.

Keywords: experiment, photography, exhibition, city

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy wartości eksperymentu rozumianego jako jeden z celów stawianych przez awangardę. Przedstawione w pracy doświadczenie naukowe miało na celu wykazanie, czy możliwe jest odczuwanie miasta i jego przekształceń za pośrednictwem wystawy fotografii tego miasta? Czy sposób ekspozycji zdjęć ma znaczenie dla ich interpretacji – wystawa w galerii/ wystawa online?

W pracy wykorzystano trzy metody badawcze – metody poznawcze poprzez doświadczanie obrazów fotografii miast w czasie wystawy w galerii sztuki oraz wystawy online, a także przez badania socjologiczne. W ten sposób udowodniono przyjętą w pracy hipotezę, że na podstawie wystawy możliwe jest odczuwanie fotografowanych miast. Preferowaną formą jest wystawa stacjonarna, choć wystawa online

ma też swoją wartość i wiele zalet, zwłaszcza w okresie ograniczenia kontaktów społecznych, co było konieczne w czasie pandemii.

Wyniki badań są ważne nie tylko z punktu widzenia wartości naukowej, lecz także stwarzają możliwość ich wykorzystania w praktyce, tak aby zapewnić udoskonalanie ekspozycji dzieł, w tym fotografii.

Słowa kluczowe: eksperyment, fotografia, wystawa, miasto

1. INTRODUCTION

In architecture, the term ‘avant-garde’ has multiple meanings. It can directly refer to the history of the late twentieth-century architecture, including its three breakthroughs – the Secession, the First Avant-Garde and Postmodernism. It is also a pursuit of innovative solutions in response to a polemic with tradition.

As the phenomenon of the avant-garde cannot be confined to a framework defined by a uniform and coherent style, it can be assumed that it is a manifesto, an attitude characterized by steadfastness in searching for unconventional and thus atypical solutions. Such exploration requires experiments for it to be possible to consider its results as innovative – as avant-garde. This love for experiments has its justification in a pursuit of a breakthrough in a given field. And it is on the experiment that the Authors focused in this work. Experiments, apart from being aligned with the pursuits of the avant-garde, are also significant in science itself – their goal is to investigate a specific phenomenon that either proves or disproves a hypothesis.

As the result of an academic experiment is never certain, it typically requires further trials that may not always bring a uniform result. This study assumed the definition of the avant-garde as a stance of pursuing new discoveries using experiments and discussed three problem areas.

The first concerns the significance of the scientific experiment in the field of architecture and urban planning.

The second outlines its subject, which is the old-new city as its two faces shaped before and after a war.

The third is the experiment itself, which involves experiencing a city via an exhibition dedicated to it.

The term ‘old-new city’ used in this study refers the transformation of cities, as in the context presented, city transformations are linked with the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The object of study was the manner of experiencing a city during two exhibitions with the same subject. However, one exhibition was stationary and took place at a gallery, while the other was displayed online. The experiment was to show whether emotions change during viewing images of cities in different ways and whether the way they were presented affected the interpretation of works and whether war had changed the face of the presented images of cities enough that experiencing them became different.

Studies of exhibitions are an active field of research in many branches of science, proof of which are publications, including the collective work edited by M. Kędzior, W. Nowak and J. Ryczek¹. The work by B. Kietlińska² proved particularly important in this study. She

¹ *Co z tym odbiorcą? Wokół zagadnienia odbioru sztuki*, M. Kędziora, W. Nowak, J. Ryczek (eds.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wydziału Nauk Społecznych UAM, Poznań 2012.

² B. Kietlińska, *Znaczenie kompetencji kulturowych i artystycznych w odbiorze sztuki* [in:] *Co z tym odbiorcą?, op. cit.*, p. 93.

demonstrated that the openness of an artistic message allows for the individual interpretation of a work. Every viewer of a work, its recipient, may experience, perceive and understand it differently. The more interpretations a work has, the more open it is. In the context of the exhibition investigated, the hypothesis assumed is of profound significance. The manner of presenting works, even if it changes their interpretation, will not be an error. The work becomes open – free from the rigid confines of its understanding and assessment. The experiment was intended not only to demonstrate whether the interpretation of the same images by different viewers was non-uniform or not, but also whether the manner of presentation of images of cities (an exhibition at a gallery/an online exhibition) impacted its coherent assessment.

It appears that the place an exhibition is held is not without significance. This was discussed by J. Ryczek³. Ryczek argued that bringing art outside of gallery and museum walls – into a city's public space – allows it to reach a greater audience. It should be observed that the public space in which such exhibitions are to take place also includes virtual reality, which was confirmed by the experiment performed by the Authors. It is a confirmation of not only reaching a wider audience, but also proves that the place where an exhibition is held, including virtual space, impacts the interpretation of artworks. A. Sienkiewicz⁴ proved that art with a subject can alter that subject's perception, understanding a city and its space. Sienkiewicz presented artistic events via which space took on a different character. Introducing signs with negative messages into a space that elicited positive impressions change its image. In the experiment conducted in this study, the event that altered the faces of cities was war. Damaged architecture and streets affect the emotions of viewers deep in thought.

M. Osyra⁵ wrote about the impact of architecture on a city and demonstrated using sociological research that architecture affects the image of public space. It also impacts its perception, although Osyra was unable to identify the specific elements of architectural structures that determine this. The experiment presented was also accompanied by the sociological survey method, whose problem scope was much broader. The survey not only solved the matter of the impact of architecture on the space of the city but was also an answer to the question as to how wartime events and thus damage to architecture alters the face of a city and experiencing it.

Wartime operations observed from outside were analysed primarily based on available sources, reports of personal experiences, photographs or films. The interpretation of events is done by using them. In one of his works, T. Ferenc⁶ explained the role of photography in depicting urban spaces. Through photography, we can document the image of cities, we can also create a new story about a city, detached from deep-rooted myths. The experiment presented was to demonstrate how photography can be used to experience the city that is the subject of an exhibition. The images photographed did not solely include photographs taken in the spaces of the presented cities. They were also photographs of collages, drawings,

³ J. Ryczek, *Bezradność (?) odbiorcy wobec transparentnych propozycji sztuki w przestrzeni miasta* [in:] *Co z tym odbiorcą?*, op. cit., p. 123.

⁴ A. Sienkiewicz, *Ingerencja artysty w systemy informacji i komunikatów przestrzeni miejskiej oraz jej wpływ na odbiorcę* [in:] *Co z tym odbiorcą?*, op. cit., p. 135.

⁵ M. Osyra, *Odbiorca między przestrzenią publiczną a architekturą* [in:] *Co z tym odbiorcą?*, op. cit., p. 175.

⁶ T. Ferenc, *Fotografia miejska a przemiany struktury i kultury miasta*, <http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.desklight-5844c7e7-3b8f-4631-9c90-c1bae8903276> (access: 24.08.2022).

transformations of photographic images – images that had already been saturated with their authors' own interpretation. A diverse imaging technique may elicit additional experiences in a viewer. It can thus be argued that the experiment went beyond the scope of the meaning of photography that Ferenc had written about.

The hypothesis investigated in this study stated that the avant-garde is a stance whose aim is to pursue discovery via academic research and includes a proclivity for experiments. The experiment conducted by the Authors was to demonstrate whether a city can be experienced via its photographs. The manner of exhibiting photographs may impact the interpretation of images.

The additional research objectives of this study were to determine:

1. How war and the destruction it brings affects the image of cities?
2. Did the interior of the gallery, the lighting, atmosphere, and stories narrated by the Authors of the photographs on the subject of the images of cities presented by them affect the experience of the cities depicted?
3. How does the manner of experiencing cities change depending on how photographs that depict them are presented – at an exhibition at a gallery or via an online exhibition?
4. How did persons who had known the image of wartime destruction solely from photographs experience the new image of the cities presented at the exhibition and how were these cities experienced by persons who saw the destruction on-site, in said city's actual space?
5. Did the age of exhibition visitors affect preferences concerning the exhibition's form – stationary or online?

The scope of the study was thus extensive, and the experiment itself answered all of the questions and research aims presented above. Due to the subject of this study, its hypothesis will be presented alongside only those findings that allow it to be either proved or disproved.

The study-experiment consisted of three parts. The first concerned the exhibition of photographs of cities at a gallery. The second concerned the presentation of the same photographs online (not all images were presented).

The third part of the experiment involved performing a survey study among exhibition attendees and most of the authors of the photographs exhibited.

Historical events formed an important context for the study – the ongoing war which undoubtedly impacted the perception of the cities affected by destruction.

The inability of all authors of the photographs on display (some of them being from Ukraine) due to the ongoing war was a major research problem. Only Professor Olena Olvinyk, as a visiting professor of the Faculty of Architecture of the Cracow University of Technology and a co-author of the exhibition, took place in the stationary version of the event.

The number of works on the damage to public space and architecture was limited due to a ban on taking photographs of recently damaged buildings.

As such, only the damage to the buildings not covered by the ban were displayed. The exhibition's co-authors staying in Ukraine received footage and photographs of the opening ceremony.

Before engaging with the experiment's subject, the Authors were aware that numerous academic studies found that there are elements that directly affect the manner of artwork exhibition – such as an exhibition's arrangement, the character of the exhibition's interior, the exhibition of a singular image, group presentation, light, etc. However, the experiment was to prove or disprove phenomena whose results were uncertain – namely whether the elements listed can contribute to completely changing one's emotions in relation to an observed image.

The experiment was expected to demonstrate the degree to which a photographic exhibition is able to recreate the atmosphere of actual places and whether it can affect objective impressions of the presented architecture and its accompanying space without significantly altering its actual experience.

It was also meant to investigate how the manner of the exhibition's presentation (stationary exhibition/online exhibition) can affect experiencing images displayed during said exhibition.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

The research methods used in this study included the cognitive method which allows experiencing works – photographic images – during a stationary exhibition at a gallery. Experiencing the exhibition elicited emotions, impressions. On their basis, the images presented, and thus the cities experienced, were assessed. These impressions were compared to those that accompanied online presentation. During both exhibitions, the respective presentation forms were assessed, and a comparative analysis was performed. The last method used was the survey study, which employed a questionnaire.

The stationary *The Old-New City* International Photography Exhibition was presented at the gallery of the Faculty of Architecture of the Cracow University of Technology at 1 Kanonicza Street in Cracow. The exhibition presented selected Ukrainian cities before the war and from the period when Kyiv came under attack. The exhibition's closing event took place on 14.05.2022.

The exhibition was divided into two parts – the first part named *The Old City*, and the second part – *The New City*. The first part featured images of cities whose images we remember from before the war. It displayed their beauty, the atmosphere of life playing out on the streets, of exceptional architecture, and traces of surviving Polishness in Zhytomyr. The images proved that a city is not only buildings, streets, squares or greenery, but also people who give life to cities.

The authors of the first part of the exhibition, which included photographs of Zaporizhzhia, Chernihiv, Lviv, Zhytomyr and Kyiv, were employees of the Faculty of Architecture of the Cracow University of Technology: Prof. Justyna Kobylarczyk BEng, PhD, DSc, Arch.; Prof. Dominika Kuśnierz-Krupa, BEng, PhD, DSc, Arch.; Marcin Furtak, BEng, PhD, DSc, Arch.; Univ. Prof. Małgorzata Hryniewicz, BEng, PhD, Arch.; as well as a Professor from Kyiv – Olena Olvinyk, PhD, Arch. from the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture (CUT FoA Visiting Professor).

The authors of the second part of the exhibition were employees of the Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture: Prof. Denys Chernyshiv, DSc; Prof. Yulia Ivashko, BEng, PhD, DSc, Arch.; Alirza Mamedov, BEng, Arch.; and Olexandr Ivashko, BEng, PhD, Arch.

During the opening ceremony, the Authors could comment on their images, the intentions behind them, and explain the title of the *The Old-New City* exhibition. The attendees included persons of varying age, as well as representatives of many academic fields.

The next stage of the study investigated an online exhibition that took place at a later date. The first part of the online exhibition began on 06.05.2022, while the last took place in August of the same year.

The exhibition was prepared using Sway software and featured images from Zhytomyr and Kyiv in the same form as they had been presented during the stationary exhibition.

The exhibition's viewers consisted of the same individuals who had attended the stationary exhibition, as well as one author of the displayed works that had not participated in the earlier exhibition.

The final stage of the experiment was a survey performed using a questionnaire.

It featured three parts – essential information, ratings for each element of the exhibition that could be done by assigning points, and written assessments using descriptions and justifications.

The questions about essential information concerned gender, age, and one's either current or planned occupation.

The second part concerned rating each element of the exhibition using a 1–10 point-based scale. The respondents could assign a given number of points only once (it was not possible to assign the same number of points to two items). The following elements were rated this way: experiencing the atmosphere of places presented, sensing the authenticity of these places, the value of the impression, experiencing architecture, experiencing light and colour. The same assessments were performed for both the stationary and online exhibition.

In the descriptive section of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to answer the following questions: Which mode of presenting the exhibition on the architecture of the city do You prefer (in a gallery or online)? Please justify Your answer. Which elements of watching the exhibition online and at a gallery did You memorize?

Children could also rate the exhibition. They were asked whether the exhibition was understandable to them, which elements of the exhibition they had memorized, and which mode of presenting works they preferred and why.

3. RESULTS

This paper presents only those results that were the most essential from the standpoint of the study's subject. Assessing the potential for experiencing the atmosphere of the cities presented at the exhibition and to sense their authenticity was of particular importance to proving the hypothesis. This assessment allowed the demonstration whether experiencing the cities was possible and which elements were especially significant in regards to these impressions. The results concerning exhibition display preferences – whether it should be stationary or online – were also important.

The results showed that it is possible to experience the cities presented at the exhibition. The potential to experience a place, sense its authenticity and experience architecture were rated especially high.

The preferred form of exhibitions were stationary displays, although many respondents also gave online exhibitions a high rating.

The results are both of academic and practical value, as the experiment can be considered successful and the hypothesis was proved. They can be used while organizing future exhibitions.

4. DISCUSSION

The research results presented can be generally applied to photography exhibitions whose main subject is the city and its transformation.

In the future, it may be possible to compare the results that concern experiencing cities by persons who have not seen wartime destruction first-hand with the results of experiencing cities by those who not only viewed an exhibition, but also saw in person the damage that had been photographed. It should be noted that not all of the persons attended the exhibition organized at the gallery due to the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Presenting specific differences in the perception of the buildings photographed as seen on site, during an exhibition at a gallery and during an online exhibition, allows for their skilful use or elimination. Hence, demonstrating which elements affect experiencing a work and to what degree they are essential. This study showed that these elements include the atmosphere of a place, the sense of authenticity, experiencing architecture, and impressions. As the sense of authenticity was preserved during the exhibition, it was not possible to manipulate the interpretation of the presented places so that they could be experienced in a completely different way. The multitude of interpretations expands the range of impressions and emotions that art can change.

The photographed fleetingness of a city induces previously unknown emotions in the viewer of a work viewed at a venue. However, it is not possible to recreate the entire background of a work viewed in an actual space 'live' in a specific time and situation.

The research can be continued by gathering many pieces of information, including on the subject of:

- How is a city experienced via photography by architects and by members of other professional communities?
- How can impressions change depending on age?
- How can statements by an exhibition's authors change the interpretation of works presented on photographs?
- Will the same impressions accompany exhibitions of works presented in different ways (photography, painting, graphics, collage, relief, installation, etc.)?

The results of the experiment can be used to organize art exhibitions – to correctly and effectively present artwork. The experiment is also valuable to the promotion of good solutions, which also applies to online exhibitions which take on a particular significance, especially during a pandemic. They can also be especially significant in relation to people who, for various reasons, including health, are unable to participate in exhibitions organized at a gallery, museum or in an open urban space.

The experiment performed is in itself valuable, as it validated the research method used. It opened the potential continuation of the study and proved the hypothesis assumed in the study.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The experiment can be continued in relation to the subject investigated so as to expand the research group and the problems included in the thematic trajectory of the study.

Pursuing answers to the following questions may yield interesting results:

- How is a city experienced via photography by architects and by members of other professional communities?
- How can impressions change depending on age?
- How can statements by an exhibition's authors change the interpretation of works presented on photographs?

- Will the same impressions accompany exhibitions of works presented in different ways (photography, painting, graphics, collage, relief, installation, etc.)?

The research was performed to confirm the weight of experiments, which in the field of academic research is an inspiration in the pursuit of achieving research goals.

This experiment took on a deeper meaning in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. It showed the beauty of cities from before its outbreak and the damage suffered by cities as a result of its continuation. It is an expression of solidarity with Ukraine and a desire to demonstrate how war changes the face of cities – their architecture and the space of their streets.

Wartime events, as well as the pandemic period, have shown that it is not always possible to come into contact with art or architecture in the real world. Digital technologies enable meetings, symposiums, conferences, as well as exhibitions to take place. The experiment was to show whether an online exhibition can be attractive or whether it allows for experiencing the titular city in the same way as if its photographs were viewed in an actual gallery.

The experiment was performed for us – a group of researchers, architects who feel compelled to show the beauty of cities of high historical value whose face has been altered by war.

The experiment was performed for a group of researchers, architects, engineers and urban planners from Kyiv, who today are among those most affected by the war's consequences.

The experiment contributed to knowledge about the impact of the mode of exhibition of the works discussed on their interpretation and assessment.

Apart from the previously listed values, the state of the art was enhanced with an original documentation of the image of cities and their damage as a result of the ongoing war, and the same images were present during two different exhibitions (a stationary exhibition and an online exhibition), and they were compared and preferences concerning the mode of exhibition were identified. In the introduction, an attempt was made to explain that the experiment may be a result of a stance characteristic of the notion of the avant-garde, whose goal was the pursuit of innovation, discovery and thus, experimentation.

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