



Week 1

Creation in public space: Overview

SUMMARY

The first week of the Create in Public Space MOOC provides an overview of artistic creation in public space. It gives an introduction to this multi-faceted movement, where the common denominator is artistic works and initiatives that are intended for spaces outside conventional art venues, such as black box theatres and art gallery or museum “white cubes”. This simple definition is broad enough to cover an infinite number of public space projects. The week’s three lessons cover three starter topics to provide a better understanding of art in public space: the history of the movement, aesthetic markers and professional organisation.

Lesson 1: Bases

The first lesson focuses on the historical rise of the street arts movement in the 1970s and 80s and the emergence of the concept of art in public space in the 2000s.

Street arts originated in the 1970s, during a time of social movements and cultural emancipation that spurred a shift away from conventionalism in every discipline. The common motivation of *street artists* was to speak directly to the general public (**public-populations**), and not just people used to going to cultural venues. Driven by the desire to make art accessible, they took to the streets, where ideas and social concerns are expressed, where demands and are made and revolts are born.

This movement was part of a specific political moment in time. It also drew its references from the avant-gardist movement (futurism, Dada, Fluxus, etc.), which had been producing actions and forms of expression that broke away from academic traditions since the 19th century, and from popular traditions such as village celebrations, agricultural festivals and other carnivals.

With their undeniable popular success, street arts achieved recognition from institutions, providing the resources for structuring a professional artistic sector in its own right.

In the early 2000s, professionals began to organise themselves into networks across Europe, allowing them to compare their journeys and practices between countries.

Anglo-Saxon countries rarely use the concept of “street arts” (*arts de la rue*) used in France, Belgium and Spain, but prefer terms like **outdoor arts**, **site-specific arts** or **open space arts** (*Künsten im öffentlichen Raum*) in Germany. It became important to start using common vocabulary that unites all these terms. The concept of **art in public space** was chosen, as it has the advantage of referring to all contemporary artistic creation that takes place outside of art venues.

This term is used in both its physical sense – describing public, private, indoor or outdoor spaces accessible to the public – and for its metaphorical meaning. Since philosopher Jürgen Habermas, public space refers to space for public debate, the **public sphere**, much like the Greek **agora**, which alludes to the political dimension or **polis**, which is key in this artistic field.

The field is now characterised by its **plurality**. This is expressed by the disciplines represented (theatre, dance, music, visual arts, etc.), by the formats (from large format productions to minimalist projects), by time (from occasional interventions to the long-term presence of artists in an area), and by the relationship with audiences (from traditional stage performances to **participative**, **immersive** or **experiential** projects).



Lesson 2: Aesthetics

The second lesson provides general information about the diversity of artistic creation, major themes and current aesthetic trends.

One common characteristic of artistic creations in public space is the intent to reveal the meaning of spaces in order to enrich them with new imagination and reoccupy them symbolically. By directly addressing the audience, it creates a community of citizen spectators through a **distribution of the sensible**.

Several major themes are explored, starting with the **myths** that have fed the collective imagination since Antiquity. Reinterpreting Homer's myths (the Minotaur) or exploring contemporary myths (football) makes artists eternal mythographers.

Community or **creating solidarity** is a recurrent theme of artistic works that focus on the ability of the audience to cooperate and work together.

The defence of freedom of expression and public freedoms is seen in works that place social issues, such as the role of women, migration, and poverty at the heart of their progressive statements.

Subverting the codes and icons of a consumer society, or hoaxes indirectly denounce the problems of commercial society. The city and uses of common

spaces is another frequent theme that is easy to channel and that fosters debate.

Looking closer at a few recent trends from the work of artists reveals that large-scale projects are being overtaken by minimalist projects that involve an intimate relationship with spectators and play off their sensory perception. This is particularly the case with **immersive projects** that spark an intimate **experience** with the audience.

Another current trend is the growing number of visual artists taking an interest in public space and using the city as a source of inspiration and life-size playing field for their projects.

Local art projects anchored in their local context to draw out documentary material that is then poetically transformed or rendered reflects a desire to understand the world on a human scale, in the face of globalisation.

The last trend is that public space artists are using digital technologies that are now part of all of our day-to-day lives, creating new virtual spaces to be questioned and explored.

Lesson 3: Organisation

The third lesson focuses on the professional organisation of the sector in Europe and internationally, showing how it has been organised to support artists and promote their work to audiences.

This section first covers the professions involved in implementing projects in public space.

Artists, event organisers, producers, technical directors, stage managers and artistic and cultural outreach workers come directly from the art world. However, other professionals are involved, especially the public authorities who issue permits/authorisations, and road and public safety and security services. The non-profit sector and networks of volunteers often participate in hosting artists and receiving the public.

The lesson then focuses on the organisation of the dissemination network, and particularly **showcase festivals**, where official programming (the festival programme) and non-programmed artists who foot

their own bill to come and busk (the fringe festival) coexist together.

Artistic works are also presented through **cultural seasons**, characterised by the seasonal organisation of shows and public events. There are other ways of creating encounters with the public, for example when artists present new artistic works after residencies or test out works that are still in the process of being developed.

France has all the key players of a professional sector, including training, artistic production, dissemination, and resource centres, and is used as an example to describe a fully structured professional sector.

