

# **A Possible Heritage**

## **Street Performances**

### **as a Participative Cultural Heritage**

Achille Zoni

(MagdaClan, Cestudir, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia)

**Abstract** Street performances can be interpreted as process of participation to a form of CH. We would like to interpret the provisions of the Faro Convention from the perspective of street performances as a form of participatory cultural experience, as along with considering the street performers as an actual heritage community. Given that the Convention confers a remarkable importance to individuals – as they are part of the communities – we will focus on the passage from the cultural object itself – the street performance – to the actors and beneficiaries of the heritage which this object constitutes: the street performers and the audience at the moment of the show.

**Summary** 1 Introduction: What Is a Street Performance? – 2 The Role of the Faro Convention and Its Spatial Framework. – 3 Taking Part in an Itinerant Cultural Heritage. – 4 Conclusions.

**Keywords** Street performances. Faro Convention. Heritage community.

## **1 Introduction: What is a Street Performance?**

Street performances as we know them today are the evolution of a *pastiche* of cultures and different forms of entertainment whose origins are very old and which embody, in some way, the sum of every performance art. This type of show has a lineage that extends back to *cinaedi* and *circulatores* of the Classical era, to buffoons and acrobats of the late Middle Ages, and to the acrobats and tightrope walkers who fluctuated between city squares and the palaces of the Renaissance lords. The subsequent phenomenon of the aggregation of acrobats, actors and comedians into real companies, which reached an apex during the Counter-Reformation, outlines the emergence of a new aesthetic dimension, with precise spatial connotations and a unique morphology. This dimension has been recently translated into a new kind of show called *nouveau cirque*, which developed in France in the '70s. *Nouveau cirque* reflects the ancient heritage of circus disciplines by defining them in different contexts, including the street.

Today the concept of street performance is used to describe a broad selection of disciplines, which assume many names both in Italy and abroad.

Depending on the location, the opinions and the traditions of the artists performing these shows, and even the name and the definition of street performance, can vary greatly. In Belgium, for example, the term *art forains* is preferred to *art de la rue*, which is considered too generic. *Art forains* is instead used to reconnect the shows to the tradition of the fair, where in ancient times street performances used to occur.

Some of the various names used seem to overlap, some seem to oppose one another. The use of expressions such as street theatre or street show do not raise major difficulties, but terms such as theatre *in situ*, artistic street expressions, urban performances or urban performing arts are more unclear. All refer to the same type of show.

The definition is not merely a formal problem, as one of the main challenges to promotion and dissemination of street performance is the lack of clarity about what subjects should be considered under these expressions in the regulations and laws.

For the purposes of this work, however, the concept of *street performance* is considered according to the following characteristics:

- It happens in the public space, which is almost always in the open air, in static or itinerant form. What really distinguishes the spaces where street performances occur is that these spaces are not designed to host any form of entertainment.
- Street performance can be done in a variety of different places and contexts, rural and urban, without compromising the quality and nature of the performance. Among the places we include are squares, streets closed or open for traffic, shopping centres, public parks, etc. Concerning the contexts, we include festivals, fairs, events, or no particular context at all: within the daily life of the city. Sometimes street performances are complementary to other types of events.
- It is distinguished from any other live show because it's not the audience entering the entertainer's space, but it is the show entering the audience's space – which is also a public space. Spectators consequently access the show free of charge, but they may choose to pay an optional offer at the end. Street performances undertake therefore a democratic relationship with the spectators, in which the artist is on the same level as the public and there are no intermediaries between them.
- Its nature is predominantly entertaining and is not linked or motivated by cultural, popular and religious traditions, as are processions and rituals.
- It falls within the realm of the performing arts and not in the visual arts.

Each of these points could be reasonably questioned, because street performances are often distinguished by exceptions to the rules. The last point is one of the most debatable: many studies have deliberately counted the visual arts and installations among possible disciplines which constitute street performances. The French approach is perhaps among the most

resolute in embracing this methodological choice. In any case, the features mentioned above make it possible to condense a substantial gamut of relations between social groups, individual skills, public spaces and values into one category. It is therefore an interesting case study to analyse in light of the most recent instruments for the safeguarding of ICH.

## 2 The Role of the Faro Convention and Its Spatial Framework

The introduction of the Faro Convention inaugurated a season of policies and studies on cultural rights which has opened innovative points of view allowing us to move easily in this direction. It is an innovative Convention, which fits into the evolutionary trajectory of the thought on CH and decisively transforms its direction. Both the principles that it states and the cultural politics that it promotes are harbingers of a pluralistic approach which characterizes the action of the CoE and stands out for its holistic definition of the concept of CH (D'Alessandro 2014).

The interest here is to draw attention to one of the main changes introduced by the text on the debate on CH: it is the shift of attention from the object to the process, by focusing on the individual and individuals – that is, the community (Dolff-Bonekämper 2009). Cultural phenomena, therefore, multilayered in relation to good practices in management and education, become a space where individuals and communities reveal themselves and interact with a participatory approach. Moreover, CH is intended as a living and changing element, characterized by a dialectic that concerns the individuals and the places where they live.

These assumptions interest us because they offer the possibility to consider the morphology of street performance as a complex system of relations between artist, audience and location – and thus between communities and public spaces. In the text of the Convention the notion of place is absolutely detached from a precise topographic dimension and a fixed spatial reference. Therefore, it can first be interpreted as a social place, a space in which the expression and practice of a certain CH manifests itself. In this way, even a simple street may be related to CH, provided that individuals recognize within a specific meaning that is not replicable elsewhere because that precise place is essential to the existence of a cultural value. To protect the heritage, then, means to protect a set of social relationships that happen in a place that is foremost a relational space.

These considerations are very close to the reality in which an itinerant street performer operates while using the concepts and practices that characterize his work. His *savoir faire* is not identified in the specific discipline that is the object of his show, but in the process of creating a temporary cathartic moment which rests on the triple relationship described in the preceding paragraphs. It is an expertise through which he is able

to build a cultural and social event that, providing the right conditions for development, can go far beyond simple public entertainment.

Once we have identified the space of a square - or any other suitable place - as the centre of those connections between spectators and artists, we can interpret street performance as a systemic expression of a genuine heritage which exists here and now. It is not possible to fully understand the street art phenomenon by focusing exclusively on the action of the artists because the value of the performance is also constituted by the presence of an audience and the relationship with it. If we assume a particularly enlightened cultural policy, we could imagine urban spaces in which governments enact specific regulatory measures on the basis of cultural values linked to the communities of street artists. This kind of choice would be a revolution in the governance of these processes, especially considering that this vision could be extended to the regional or national level.

The Convention gives a formal space for debate and engagement in the safeguarding of projects to public institutions and affected communities. A simple example of a possible interaction between the two voices would be to identify and consider the areas where street performances traditionally occur as CH sites. It would be plausible to state that a square, depending on the activity of street performers, is part of the CH of a city. As such, the presence of artists and audiences in this place should be preserved, controlled and promoted, as stated in the concept of a HC given in art. 2. It is clear that, at present, even the most virtuous regulations do not take into account the possibilities offered by this approach. It goes far beyond the domain of administrative authorities. A practice based on this vision of cultural policy would be able to give a new direction to other crucial issues, such as the official recognition and promotion of street performances.

### **3 Taking Part in an Itinerant Cultural Heritage**

The bold assertion of cultural rights as an integral part of human life, like other fundamental rights, also creates the ground for a further step in this direction. Without departing from the scope of our discussion, it is interesting to recall here that the detailed definition of such rights under the Fribourg Declaration of cultural rights<sup>1</sup> also includes a right to identity and CH, and, as already highlighted elsewhere (Zagato 2015), it confirms that the right of everyone to engage with the CH of his choice has to be conceived as an aspect of the right to participate in cultural life, which is

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1 Fribourg Declaration on Cultural Heritage adopted on 7 May 2007, available at <https://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instreet/Fribourg%20Declaration.pdf> (2017-12-15).

affirmed by the Faro Convention (art. 15(1)(a)). The assertion of a right to CH that characterizes this Convention is an extremely important legal arrangement, especially if it is addressed to a community whose hallmarks are still ignored and are marked by a lack of or inconsistent acknowledgment on the part of civil society. By leverage with these rights, however, street performance and its artists could find a large and effective form of recognition. The problem is now to clearly establish how this community should and could reconfigure itself to fit within the text of the Convention.

To avoid misunderstandings, it is important to start by recalling that according to the action coordinated as in the art. 1, and in art. 1(b), the subject of law is not only collective but also individual. These two areas are not on the same level and this could lead to confusion: the fact that every individual has the right to their own cultural development or to participate in public cultural life is not connected to the needs of a community within the same rights. The distinction which regulates relationships between individuals and communities is therefore based on a responsibility that, like the right to property, is foremost personal. To exercise this right, therefore, requires answering specific responsibilities: in order to enjoy the aforementioned right on a collective level one must take part in a HC. Cultural liberty and the right to property, in essence, are exercised in compliance with group membership through a form of liability that arises from the individual and then moves to the community. We have to consider that the text is addressed to the Member States who must ensure the recognition of above responsibility and rights, a constraint from which the States cannot withdraw.

Here we deal with a conceptual cornerstone: a HC should not rely on this constraint, because the States assume it as an obligation. Member States, in fact, cannot do anything until the persons involved begin to cooperate in a rational and democratic manner. In our case, it would not be enough to deal with the problem by involving both the community of artists and the public institution: a third pole becomes necessary, as do clarifications that take into account the polymorphic nature of today's street performances. The large-scale vision we have adopted requires that public players are not considered only on a national scale, but also at the regional and sub-regional levels. Artists should try to find a form of cooperation or participation that can communicate with and be recognized formally by interested parties, public and private.

The federation is definitely a good starting point, as the various existing cases have demonstrated a strong potential for dialogue with the institutions concerned. In any case, it seems that the most effective form of cooperation - bearing in mind the nature of the problem - should include an international network: this could be a network of the various federations, which would be able to respond to problems that arise with superior expertise.

Finally, we must also take into account the large presence of commissioners and therefore the presence of private organizations. The full implementation of art. 4(a), cannot lie outside the consideration of private stakeholders in the industry that we are analysing here. If it is true that “anyone who, alone or collectively, has the right to benefit from the CH and contribute to its enrichment”, the presence of the private sector is essential, provided that this clause is not interpreted as a mere form of economic exploitation of CH. It is however necessary to acknowledge that private productions of street performance events are an essential part of this form of entertainment, without which it would not exist as we see it now.

This approach accommodates the full concept of *optimum competency synergy* that has been proposed elsewhere in relation to the liability and the right to heritage of communities. This synergy identifies the same three sectors (private, public and collective) as the key players of CH. It should be noted that, given the above concepts, the Faro Convention grants a strong potential to take a radical step forward in the dialogue with institutions and with civil society.<sup>2</sup> This is precisely what the street performance milieu needs.

Regarding the connection between a HC and the spatial context, we can make one last, important observation. The scope of the concepts contained in the Convention make it possible to consider the spatial reference in terms of ductility and adaptability. Gabi Dolff-Bonekämper (2009) specifies that “a HC can be built up across territories and social groups. It is defined neither in terms of the place where the heritage is situated, nor in terms of the social status of its members, who may participate on from elsewhere, even from a long way away”.

Basically, this means that if anyone in the community is the owner of a right to cultural participation – as we stated above – we need to establish where and with whom any individual can exercise this right. What if, as in the case of street artists, the owner of said rights moves from one city to another, from one state to another: is, therefore, an itinerant? In this case, some questions remain to be clarified: we are discussing the place where a right is enjoyed, both on the spatial and social level. The Faro approach is relevant in this case as well: individuals may choose to belong to different communities at the same time or, by changing over time, to move into the social space and the physical space. Similarly, still moving, they can continue to belong to the same community without being limited to a fixed place. They can collectively or singly associate with other existing

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2 One of the main advantages of this Convention is the ability to focus attention on a particular aspect of the relationship between CH, social communities and territory, which has a major role in our case: it is the shift from the concept of government to the one of governance.

groups that show some connection with their cultural identification, while retaining their requirements for mobility. In extreme cases, the concept of community asset can be extended to include the virtual belonging of individuals to that community. In addition, heritage communities can relate to a single industry, thus uniting people who work and cooperate in a common cultural order: this can be done temporarily or permanently. The spatial context as expressed by the Faro Convention can be extremely large or tiny, but cannot be a conceptually closed space. In our case, this strong adaptability is one of the main features that would allow an interpretation of street performers as an actual HC, whose spatial context is characterized by continuous mobility.

## 4 Conclusions

It is interesting to consider that the provisions of the 2003 UNESCO Convention would not have led to similar results. The important concept of participation, interpreted as active presence of the holders of the practices in question, still firmly ties in to the concept of community, but here it is relegated to a transfer of competences in the form of administrative activity.<sup>3</sup> Operationally communities are seen here as a veritable social interface for the intangible heritage detection system, and their role is interpreted as a mediator between the governing bodies.

Furthermore, within the meaning of art. 2(1), the Convention only provides vague parameters to define “communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals”. It can be stated within the meaning of that article that the practitioners and the depository of a heritage item are those who identify it as part of their heritage and who have an active role in its transmission and re-creation. Well, in the case of itinerant street performers, it is not a simple task to identify all of the cultural custodians. There are typically no particular difficulties in the attribution of certain elements of ICH to specific representative communities, because these communities are clearly established and easily identifiable. The relationship between individuals, heritage and territory is therefore resolved *a priori* and does not constitute an obstacle: it is instead the base upon which the framework of safeguards provided by the Convention operates. Regarding the dimension of street performances, however, we face difficulties: which community should be considered representative considering that all street performance communities are constantly changing and evolving, both in terms of space and in terms of individual members?

<sup>3</sup> Europe’s diversity of forms of administration and the exchange of experience between these administrations gives an idea of how many different cases a street performer could face trying to carry out his work while respecting existing regulations.

The Faro Convention's provisions allow us to overcome these difficulties thanks to the trend towards an idea of evolving and changing heritage: CH does not imply an attitude toward the past, but it includes an element of constant transformation due to the interest and active participation of involved communities. The tools of governance that would be developed by virtue of that vision would be put to good use in the domain of street performances.

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