Performing the Present, Saving the Future:

Digital Media Presence in the Work of *Raspeani Skopjani*

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**Key words:** Skopje 2014; tactical media; digital media presence; self-organised; performance interventions

Abstract:

The self-organised choir *Raspeani Skopjani* has been actively performing on the streets of Skopje, the capital of the Republic of Macedonia, for six years, protesting against the government-run project *Skopje 2014*. The project intends to transform the city centre, with a wide range of new buildings. However, many question its cost and its intention to revamp the existing Socialist Realist facades and bridges. The choir has a clear strategy: it shows up unannounced, at specific politically pertinent locations in Skopje (like the Central Orthodox Church, Parliament, or City Museum), its participants sing, and then disperse. The choir’s appearances are carefully recorded, edited and posted on YouTube, as well as other websites. By transposing its performances to a digital context, *Raspeani Skopjani* uses what Geert Lovink describes as ‘tactical media’ tools. I argue that it adopts tactical media to offer alternative forms of storytelling and remembering concerning the current political moment in Skopje. The choir’s main tactic is to construct and disseminate the digital record in order to reach a wider audience. This digital record of the events expresses the desire of the street protesters to expand their reach to online audiences and emphasizes their belief in the need for change in contemporary Macedonian politics.

We need a history that does not save in any sense of the word; we need a history that performs. (Jane Blocker and Ana Mendieta)[[1]](#footnote-1)

## He Who Sings Means no Evil

An old, frequently invoked Balkan proverb says, *‘He who sings means no evil’*.
This proverb’s philosophy resonates in the civic and political activism of a group of young protestors from Skopje. They call themselves *Raspeani Skopjani* (Singing Skopjans), and for almost six years now they have been actively performing on the streets of Skopje. They show up unannounced, usually at weekends, at specific politically pertinent locations in Skopje, such as the Central Orthodox Church, Parliament, City Museum and others. They sing, and then disperse. Their songs and choreographies, carefully chosen, respond to major local and international political events.[[2]](#footnote-2) Their appearances are carefully recorded, edited and posted on YouTube, as well as other websites. [[3]](#footnote-3) The digital documentation functions as a tactical tool to disseminate the protestors’ message to those who couldn’t be present and who are interested in the views that *Raspeani Skopjani* try to represent.

I decided to discuss the performances of *Raspeani Skopjani* in this essay for two reasons. Firstly, this self-organised choir has had a significant impact on the current Macedonian democratic and political debate.[[4]](#footnote-4) Secondly, the digital reach and distribution of the company’s events amplify the impact of its performances. *Raspeani Skopjani* is clearly a part of a global trend for new practices of resistance, where real and virtual actions are correlative and complementary. Other examples include the popular Gezi Park ‘Standing still’ protestors or the numerous Balkan choirs that, similar to *Raspeani Skopjani*, disseminate their work through social media, such as Le Zbor and Zbor Praksa in Croatia, Kombinat and Z’borke in Slovenia, Prroba, UHO, Horkestar, Svetonazori in Serbia and Hor November 29 from Vienna.

I argue that *Raspeani Skopjani* uses what Geert Lovink describes as ‘tactical media’ tools,[[5]](#footnote-5) to offer alternative forms of storytelling and remembering concerning the current political moment in Skopje. In *The ABC of Tactical Media*, Lovink and Garcia write:

Tactical Media are what happens when the cheap ‘do it yourself’ media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the internet) are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Garcia and Lovink distinguish tactical media from other types of media primarily by their participatory character: ‘Tactical Media do not just report events, as they are never impartial, they always participate and it is this that more than anything separates them from mainstream media’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Participation is strongly enhanced by the do-it-yourself approach to media-making, which is evident in the digital recordings of *Raspeani Skopjani*’s performances. The dissemination of the videos arises from using the toolset provided by YouTube as a sharing platform, and a methodology that seeks to make permanently available what would otherwise be the ephemeral moments of the choir’s appearances.[[8]](#footnote-8) Here it is important to emphasise that most of the choir members do not have any background in performance or media-making. Most of their media documentation was assembled through trial and error. During the early phase of their activities (2009-2011) live events were simply documented by way of their phone cameras and posted on YouTube. During the later stages (2012-2015) we see a far more complex methodology: the choir presents its work at organised events,[[9]](#footnote-9) the videos are edited, dissemination is far more structured, and *Raspeani Skopjani* thereby has a more established presence on social media.[[10]](#footnote-10) The street protesters’ performance tactics aim to expand their reach in order to communicate their belief in the need for change in contemporary Macedonian politics. However complex the documentation, the main focus is still on the performance and the bodies of the choir members. As Kluitenberg observes, ‘the transgression into public requires as an absolute necessity a physical outpouring onto the streets and squares, even if, as in the Egyptian case, its digitally networked premeditation was equally necessary for this boundary breaking moment.’[[11]](#footnote-11)

[Image 1 near here]

# The formation of *Raspeani Skopjani*

During the 2010 local election campaign, the Mayoral candidate Koce Trajanovski proposed repairing the city clock at the old train station (which now serves as the city museum). Many of the citizens of Skopje perceived this proposal as highly offensive: the broken museum clock points to 05:17 am, the time when, on 26 July 1963, the city was struck by a terrible earthquake and the old train station was destroyed.[[12]](#footnote-12) *Raspeani Skopjani* appeared on the election morning of 12 November 2009 in front of the old train station, sang the song ‘Time Machine’ and disseminated the video of its performance widely across social media.[[13]](#footnote-13) This was the first of many performances that specifically targeted the government’s intention to erase the country’s communist past.

**[Image 2 near here]**

In 2009, the central square of Skopje became a focus of attention on the part of the ultra-nationalistic government of Macedonia, who proposed a redevelopment of the entire one-mile area around it. As a result, Skopje has been undergoing one of Europe’s biggest urban design upheavals – a project dubbed *Skopje 2014*. Described by Helena Smith in the *Guardian* as a ‘building bonanza’, the project was originally intended to transform the city centre with a wide range of new buildings.[[14]](#footnote-14) The government’s five-year plan *Skopje 2014* immediately became one of the hottest topics in the Macedonian blogosphere and on social media, where predominately young people criticised the urban plans. Bloggers questioned the architectural style and the project’s prerogative to revamp the existing Socialist Realist facades and bridges. A grass-roots protest movement was established, led by a group of students and young architects. Using social media to organise themselves, the protestors rallied in public against what they perceived as the forceful reordering of public space. Tensions peaked and protesters were attacked in public on multiple occasions.[[15]](#footnote-15) This created an atmosphere of fear: the activists realised that they needed something that would allow them to bridge the gap between the social media discussions concerning the events, and the people who supported the cause but were not out on the streets protesting. *Raspeani Skopjani’s* performances did precisely this. The choir embodied the protest and successfully transferred its content back into the digital sphere, modified and enriched, to transmit to the online audience the message of non-compliance with the government’s plan, thus employing media tactics to bring this new audience into the protest.

[Image 3 near here]

***Raspeani Skopjani*’s tactics**

In this section I will examine the media tactics that the choir employs to conceive the digital records, by looking at its performance of ‘Ciao Bella’. *Raspeani Skopjani*’s performances are a cross between a smart mob and flash mob. As argued by Muse, ‘flash mobs are a subset of the smart mob’ and both are modes of gathering that use distributed technology to arrange people or information.[[16]](#footnote-16) The choir, as with many other smart mob interventions, uses distributed technology to inform people about the performance location. Similar to other smart mobs (such as the Arab Spring demonstrations in 2010-11 and the student protests in Chile in 2013) the choir’s interventions serve political ends. Its members use cyberspace to coordinate brief performances in urban locations. The organisers announce the location and nature of actions by email or text message to a group of participants, who in turn use social media to multiply the number of participants. In contrast to smart mobs, flash mobs are defined by an uncritical reproduction of pop culture phenomena in public spaces. *Raspeani Skopjani*’s members use the visual vocabulary of the flash mob: they replicate popular songs and blend into the anonymous urban environment. They also always film the choir in action, ensuring that they capture the specific location, and later distribute the video online. *Raspeani Skopjani*’s focus is on the creation of online audiences who will encounter a performance that is both framed by the screen and by the knowledge that the event is a political intervention. Its impact depends on the conversion of ephemeral performance into the somewhat more permanent medium of online video.

 In order to analyse the transition from live to digital, I will elaborate on the choir’s rendition of the Italian ‘Ciao Bella’ partisan song. With this performance the choir openly opposes the government’s intention to erase the country’s communist past. The lyrics of the Italian song are filled with emotion and determination to fight, and even die, in the battle against fascism. The last verse of the song contains the lyrics:

E questo è il fiore del partigiano morto per la libertà! che è morto per la liberta! (And this is the flower of the partisan, Who died for freedom, who died for freedom!).

The song is an international hymn to freedom and was widely used in Yugoslavia to commemorate liberation after the Second World War. Since the breakup of Yugoslavia and the rise of nationalism, the National Liberation War has been labelled as part of a problematic socialist past and has become the subject of denial and revisionism by the Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski.

The chosen performance location for the choir’s version of ‘Ciao Bella’ was a square in Skopje, in front of the Army House, a modernist building created to host cultural events and commemorate the role of the partisan movement in the country’s liberation. The performance date was 11 October 2010, the anniversary of the local anti-Axis resistance’s first attacks against the Bulgarian occupier. During the performance the choir re-enacted a physical formation that replicated one of the most significant monuments of this period, a statue called *Liberators of Skopje* designed by Ivan Mirković and built in 1955. In the online video, the live performance is juxtaposed with close-up images of the monument, to highlight the link. In her analysis of self-organised choirs in post-socialist ex-Yugoslav countries, Ana Hofman argues that most of the choirs, including *Raspeani Skopjani,* perform Partisan revolutionary songs not only to recall the historic importance of the National Liberation Struggle in World War Two but to address current political struggles. She asserts the link to choral singing as a live practice in Yugoslavia, and notes that ‘In reviving Partisan songs, they confirm that choral singing is not a conservative and outdated musical form but an important form of aesthetic experience for collective mobilisation in political struggle’.[[17]](#footnote-17)

[Image 4 near here]

# Self-organised performance and its media presence: reaching the audience

I have been following socially-engaged art practice for many years, observing forms of performance protest. Such performances take place in classrooms and streets, in museums and churches, in lofts and parks. Over the last six years I have had the privilege of following the work of *Raspeani Skopjani*, mostly on social media. What started with an appointed place and time for a weekly singing critique has grown and changed to serve as a basis for social media discussions, collaborations, public presentations, and friendships.  At the root of it all has been a commitment to thinking through self-organised performance and exchange with real and diffused audiences. The sociologists Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst argue that today, in addition to joining ‘simple’ audiences when we witness a live event, and ‘distributed’ or mass audiences when we watch an event from a mediated distance, we also become ‘diffused audiences,’ as ubiquitous media transform life into a constant performance in which we are more often both participants and audience.[[18]](#footnote-18)

 Communication technologies create new possibilities for self-organisation and self-mobilisation, bypassing barriers of censorship and repression imposed by the state. For Manuel Castells the possibility of protest relies on the affordances of technologies that he classifies as mass self-communication.[[19]](#footnote-19) *Raspeani Skopjani* makes use of mass self-communication technologies to generate performance. Ivana Dragsic, a core member, relates the choir’s organisation structures to its wider purpose:

The performances are abounding with transformative power. Ranging from weirdness, self-awareness, empathy, to empowerment and uplifting energy that ultimately depends on having to listen to the other. In a philosophical and practical manner, it is a very cathartic personal and collective experience. The urge to self-organise came after the urge to sing, or at least try to convey a political message in a different way. At the beginning, there is initiative, enthusiasm, spontaneous functioning and leisure. The urge to self-organise appears at a later point. As performances grew more complex, the production requirements increased, as well as the personal duties.[[20]](#footnote-20)

 [Image 5 near here]

Castells emphasises that social movements of the information age adopt values and take up organisational forms that are specific to the kind of society in which they take place. In particular he notes:

So, there is a great deal of cultural and political diversity around the world. At the same time, because power relations are structured nowadays in a global network and played out in the realm of socialized communication, social movements also act on this global network structure and enter the battle over the minds by intervening in the global communication process. They think local, rooted in their society, and act global, confronting the power where the power holders are, in the global networks of power and in the communication sphere.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The global network offers extraordinary media access for social movements to build their autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects. *Raspeani Skopjani*’s digital documentation remains available through social media, suggesting alternative narratives for public spaces.

**Conclusion**

All the events that *Raspeani Skopjani* organises are linked by one and the same question: what is the relationship between individual agency and the historical process of a society? The acts of the choir exist in the liminal space between the live and the mediated. As suggested by Castells, social movements are not originated by technology, they use technology. But technology is not simply a tool, it is a medium, it is a social construction.[[22]](#footnote-22) *Raspeani Skopjani* uses mass self-communication to revolt against the *antiquization* of the Macedonian public sphere.[[23]](#footnote-23) They stage a form of tactical media protest animated by an implicit agenda to reclaim public space (both physical and virtual) from state control. In this instance the digital documentation offers alternative readings of the past and the present. That of the choir’s performance ‘Ciao Bella’, for instance, remains as a reminder of its resistance to the government’s re-imagining of the past.

The work of *Raspeani Skopjani* rethinks the function of tactical media. The choir’s intention from the start was to oppose the system, create alternative digital histories and find possible solutions through subversion. Over the course of six years’ work its members have built an organisational model around networked communication and left documentation of an alternative cultural activity. The tactical appropriation of media tools by *Raspeani Skopjani* heightens the tension between what the political order has imposed on its participants and their self-determination, which is of sovereign importance to them. Their legacy is a new generation of protestors that continues to resist the Government’s re-ordering of space.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**Figure captions**

Image 1 *Raspeani Skopjani* in Ljubljana, Slovenia as part of the project Vsi v en glas!. Photograph courtesy of Filip Jovanovski.

Image 2 Skopje 2014. Photograph courtesy of Dragoljub Nikolovski.

Image 3 Uber Skulpturalles 8, 2012, Photoshop. Photograph courtesy of Matej Bogdanovski.

Image 4 Uber Skulpturalles 8, 2012, Photoshop. Photograph courtesy of Matej Bogdanovski.

Image 5 *Raspeani Skopjani* performance in Skopje, Macedonia in front of The City Museum of Skopje. Photograph courtesy of Filip Jovanovski.

1. Jane Blocker, and Ana Mendieta, *Where is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p.134. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, the choir performed Toto Cutugno’s *Insieme* on the date Macedonia was accepted as an accession country into the European Union. They sang Janis Joplin’s *Mercedes Benz* after the media revealed a scandal involving high priests from the Macedonian Orthodox Church who used church funding to buy expensive vehicles for personal use. The choir performed Monty Python’s Flying Circus’s *The Lumberjack Song* after the Mayor of Skopje cut down the trees on one of the city’s main avenues, despite big protests against this decision. It also performed a variation of traditional Orthodox Christian hymns in order to protest against the arrest of members of the pop group Pussy Riot in 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The choir keeps YouTube video documentation of every performance. The documentation can be found under the YouTube channel named ‘*Plostad Sloboda* (City Square Freedom)’ (5 October 2009):

<https://www.youtube.com/user/PlostadSloboda/videos> [accessed 12 October 2015] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The political debate in Macedonia since 2005 is heavily influenced by the ultra-nationalistic government led by the party VMRO. Journalists and bloggers are often working under threat of intimidation. Media owners’ collusion with the government results in a biased, partisan and incomplete journalism: many activists’ actions and anti-government protests remain invisible in the public discourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Geert Lovink, *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p.186 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. David Garcia and Geert Lovink. *The ABC of Tactical Media*, 1997, <www.tacticalmediafiles.net/article.

jsp?objectnumber=37996> [accessed 20 August 2016]. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Eric Kluitenberg, [*Legacies of Tactical Media: The Tactics of Occupation: From Tompkins Square to Tahrir*](http://monoskop.org/log/?p=3239)*.*  (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011) p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The choir was invited to The Festival of Self-Organised Choirs in Ljubljana, Slovenia and Belgrade, Serbia. The event in Ljubljana was organised and documented by the scholar and activist Ana Hoffman. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In addition to the YouTube channel, the choir opened a Facebook page. Available from: https://www.facebook.com/Raspeani-Skopjani-10150114559685235/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kluitenberg, *Legacies of Tactical Media*, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The centre of Skopje, the Republic of Macedonia’s capital city, was developed from scratch after the catastrophic earthquake in 1963. The devastation gave rise to the idea of an international design competition. The competition, which was held in 1965 and financed by the UN as a result of an unprecedented level of international solidarity, was won by the Japanese modernist architect Kenzo Tange. The proposed design was never completely realised, due to lack of finances and appropriate planning. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ‘Time Machine’ was a cover of a pop song written and performed by the Macedonian band Nokaut. The music was based on the song ‘September’ by Earth, Wind and Fire. However, the lyrics address the incapability of Macedonian politicians to create change and the wish of young people to escape from the country by using a time machine. The choir’s performance can be seen on the following link: Vremenska masina (2009) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bgK0F5PgiA> > [Accessed 25 May 2015 ] [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Helena Smith, ‘Macedonia statue: Alexander the Great or a warrior on a horse?’, Guardian, 14 August 2011 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/14/alexander-great-macedonia-warrior-horse> > [accessed 20 November 2012]. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Balkan Insight. ‘Violence Disrupts Student Protests in Skopje’, Balkan Insight, 30 March 2009 <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/violence-disrupts-student-protests-in-skopje> [accessed 12 February 2016]. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. John H. Muse, ‘Flash Mobs and the Diffusion of Audience’, *Theater*, 40 (3): 9 (December 2010) 9-23 (p.10). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Sasa Dragojlo. *Old Partisan Songs Have ‘New Revolutionary Potential’: Interview with Ana Hofman*. [online] Balkaninsight.com. Available at: http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/old-partisan-songs-have-new-revolutionary-potential--05-26-2016 [accessed 21 June 2016]. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination* (London: Sage, 1998), p.57 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Manuel Castells, ‘Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society’, *International Journal of Communication* 1 (June 2007), 238-266 (p.248). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ivana Dragsic interviewed by Elena Marchevska, 12 March 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Manuel Castells, ‘Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society’, p.249. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Manuel Castells, ‘Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society’, *International Journal of Communication*, p. 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Anastas Vangeli, ‘Nation-building ancient Macedonian style: the origins and the effects of the so-called antiquization’, in *Macedonia, Nationalities Papers*, 39:1 (2011), pp. 13-32, DOI: 10.1080/00905992.2010.532775. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. At the time of writing, the most recent anti-government protests in Macedonia in 2016 were named the ‘Colourful Revolution’ by the media, precisely because of their use of art and media tools to oppose a corrupt election process. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)