Public Space Performs – creative explorations of performativity in public space

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ABSTRACT

This paper, presented at the *Past, Present and Future of Public Space* in Bologna (June 2024) focuses on the understanding of the public sphere as a "performative arrangement" (Cartiere and Zebracki, 2016), looking at the ways in which art can contribute new insights into this concept, thereby promoting new possibilities in taking ownership of, as well as consciously experiencing the choreographic, sensorial and aesthetic dimension of public space. Drawing on a perspective on public art that intentionally challenges the cultural tendency to see this as mere urban decoration and as necessarily entailing permanent artworks in public space, here the emphasis is on ephemeral practices. Whether through participatory projects, interdisciplinary interventions or indeed performances in a theatrical sense, public spaces may be reimagined and their potential reacquainted with.

The paper draws on the author's previous writing on 'Performing Museography' (2023) and 'Critical Theatricality' (2021), as well as on the pedagogical ethos embedded in the Masters of Public Art and Performative Practices at London Metropolitan University. The author's own artistic practice is referred to, through the project 'Choreographics of Square', a video installation depicting the movement of people in three city squares (Federation Square in Melbourne, Trafalgar Square in London and Piazza San Marco in Venice).

Distinguishing the concept of performativity from that of performance (Von Hantelman, 2014) the paper nevertheless sees both within a continuum of experiences, in which the dialogical relationship between public, space and time is creatively reinterpreted through artistic intervention. According to this understanding, artistic practices that deal with the performative dimension of public space may function as ways to champion the latter's cultural and human value, as well as to address the inherent complexities and challenges related to this.

It is no surprise that the phrase 'public art' may be so difficult to define: one only needs to think of how its embedded terms 'art' and 'public' are just as slippery, porous and often with conflicting connotations. Yet, in my experience, when asking people what images this phrase conjures up, there is a startling similarity in their responses: we often think of public art as large works of, typically, sculpture, somewhere outdoors. While this image may of course represent an important example of public art, it is significant that it dominates our collective subconscious, drawing a key connection between this practice and its roots in that of traditional, chiefly imperialist, monuments. There is a hierarchical implication in this genealogy: the object of art tends to display grandiose proportions and a projection into eternity – it is permanent, authoritative and of an assumed universal valence; it is supposed to mark public space, but in doing so it often takes space away from the public, who is supposed to accept its found presence as a gift from above, from the powers that be.

Before delving deeper into these issues, let us first address the key interdisciplinarity of contemporary public art: just like art itself, the media used in public art may not only vary but blur

with one another, beyond the confines of the artefact as a three-dimensional object. Public art may take place in the immaterial, the digital, the virtual and of course the ephemeral. What makes it public art is, I would propose, how it interacts with the public sphere, be this a physical location or indeed a virtual one. This emphasis on the phrase public sphere captures, as pointed out by Hewitt and Jordan (2016), a dimension in this type of practice that is not stuck in the implication of simply siting an artwork in an outside.

> The public is neither an empirical body, nor a spatial concept. The public sphere is a performative arrangement; it is the activity of 'going public' or 'making something public' that fills particular places and spaces with public life. (Hewitt & Jordan, 2016; pp. 27-28)

It is this dimension of public art that I would like to emphasise here as complexifying this field and challenging its stereotypical connotations. This notion of public sphere as performative arrangement conjures up further nuances in art: on the one hand, the vernacular of contemporary art has embraced the word "performative" often to simply mean performance itself or what resembles it. This is somewhat different from the roots of this word in philosophy and the social sciences, which, as reminded by Von Hantellman (2014), point at the implicit codes of both verbal and non-verbal communication that determine the relationships between people and context, and, in doing so, can be seen as "reality-producing". In art, Von Hantelmann suggests that this understanding of the performative "brings into perspective (…) the contingent and difficult to grasp realm of impact and effects that art brings forth both situationally, i.e. in a given spatial and discursive context, and relationally, e.g. in relation to a viewer or a public" (pp. 12-13).

As argued in my previous writing (Scarso, 2021 and 2023), I prefer an understanding of performativity that is envisaged as a continuum of possibilities, ranging from the explicitly and consciously performed to the embedded performativity of social conventions. If, as argued by Von Hantelmann, all art is implicitly performative according to the philosophical understanding of this term, I propose that art that deals with publicness is performative to an even higher degree. And, to go back to Hewitt and Jordan, I would argue that it is the degree of performativity, as opposed to simply where the work is sited, that justifies its understanding as "public art" first and foremost: the conscious way in which it relates to the viewer, to the relationship between viewers and the one between the latter and the situational setting in which it takes place, crucially, the public realm.

In 2020, I launched at London Metropolitan University the Masters in Public Art and Performative Practices. It is significant that its original title was Public Art and Performance, as it was thought that the word performative may confuse prospective candidates. My reservations with the original title were that this may be misunderstood as meaning that performance, in a theatrical sense, would be taught as part of it, whereas it is precisely the interdisciplinarity of performative practices, in whichever medium, that is at the core of this programme. The course has since attracted candidates from across the world and across disciplines: fine art, theatre, film, media, architecture, urbanism and social practice.

A key aspect of this course is its international ethos in fostering connections across the world, so that ideas of what constitutes public art can be continuously redefined and understood according to a multiplicity of perspectives. This effort has been substantially aided by existent networks enabling dialogues both within and outside of academia: City Space Architecture has of course been invaluable in this respect. This internationality, on the other hand, is also counterbalanced by an emphasis on the local, so that we keep highlighting how the "public" always is a sited reality: rather than looking for universal answers, therefore, the global dimension is understood as the combination

of innumerable local ones, which can be compared and which can share experiences with one another, in their idiosyncratic characteristics.

Take any object and place it in a public space, as an art intervention.

This is one of my first tasks on the course, before students begin to explore more directly concepts such as counter-monumentality and participation. This task, which I have shared in multiple contexts, such as my laboratory Public Art Experiment for the British Council in Hong Kong (2021), always reveals powerful insights into what we understand as public space and how artistic practice may relate to this. The object may be anything, but I try to encourage choosing it according to some form of personal link or narrative. Exercising care in placing it in public space, curating its display, is an important practice for the student, emphasising the need to look for a relationality between object and setting, beyond the mere claiming of public space for the benefit of one's own self-expression (an issue that I see common and problematic in mainstream approaches to public art).

Students often comment that they are disappointed by the fact that passers-by may not notice or may deliberately ignore the exercise as it takes place. But really, that is one of its most important learnings. On the one hand, the task attunes the participant to noticing how the object placed in public space embodies new connotations in its new siting, it changes *because of* public space; on the other hand, for public space to meaningfully change as a result of the object's presence in it, time is needed in developing a connection with the space, understanding its performative dimension.

People-watching

The idea of observing, listening to public space is in itself a creative stimulus: the simple activity of "people watching", as so popularly embedded in the way many public spaces are architecturally and socially conceived (one only needs to think of the typical café on a square as example of this), is both essential in public art as a preparation for a new work and also represents for me an interesting starting point for artistic exploration, which I have explored both in connection with my pedagogical approaches, as well as in my artistic practice. In my video series Choreographics of Square (2023), I filmed static shots focussing on the movement and behaviour of people across three metropolitan squares as my chosen case studies: Trafalgar Square in London, Piazza San Marco in Venice and Federation Square in Melbourne. With each square being filmed from four different angles, the footage would later be converted into digital animations – this is both an aesthetic choice in post-production and an ethical consideration in keeping the depicted people anonymous and unrecognisable. As a result, each square is represented in four video channels, so that not only the different angles are juxtaposed and viewed in synchronicity, but the three squares may be also explored together at the same time, where the projections are exhibited side by side.

This is not so much a work of public art, unless, in a more literal sense, it is to be projected in public spaces; it is, rather, art that reflects on the public realm in its performative implications. There is something fascinating about the choreographic exploration of people's proxemics and kinetics as they move in public spaces. This approach builds on previous artistic projects of mine, such as Museographic Animations (2022), where a similar approach was used in collaboration with MUVE (Fondazione dei Musei Civici di Venezia), within which the idea of "choreography of agency" proposed by Diamantopoulou and Christidou (2016) in the context of the museum, is translated into digital artworks. Drawing on my reflections on these in a dedicated article (Scarso, 2023), I look at

the layered composition deriving from the content depicted: the external constraints of public space act as a choreographic premise in their own right, determining how people move in such a setting; conversely, people's own idiosyncratic responses cause unexpected, improvisational elements that, framed by the camera and additionally superimposed with soundtrack, animation effects and the multi-channel format, provide a composite outcome that can be appreciated in its multidimensional complexity.

Each video component features a series of impromptu micro-narratives that are highlighted by the format of presentation: it always surprises me how, both compositionally and dramaturgically, each shot looks almost carefully staged, with actions that appear meaningfully responding to the frame that contains them and the time-span in which they occur. The fact that each public square is filmed at a particular public festivity or occasion (half-term holidays in Trafalgar Square, Shrove Tuesday in Piazza San Marco and a weekend festival in Federation Square) contributes a celebratory dimension in these spaces and allows for all age ranges to be included.

Public Space Performs

The practice of carefully observing and creatively documenting public spaces contributes an understanding that Public Space *is* performance, it *performs*. It does so, on a philosophical level, because it embeds social conventions in the behavioural patterns of its users that can be seen as performative, and because it can be interpreted, as a result, as an aesthetic and sensorial realm of performance. Understanding this principle is for me an invaluable way to connect with how art can create meaningful responses to public space, which transcend its perception as built environment and is akin to Raban's idea of the 'soft city' (1998): public space is about the relationships between people and not simply a designated location in between the confines of private ones.

It is exactly because public space performs, that the public cannot be taken for granted. Yet, this poses an intrinsic dilemma in public art: to what extent should we consult the public in the creation of new work and to what extent should we instead trust in an artist's vision and their risk-taking endeavours? In previous writing (Scarso & Thompson, 2022), I explored this unique conundrum while reflecting on the work of public art production company Artichoke: its CEO, Helen Marriage, raised an important point about the progressive tendency for public art programming to emphasise the role of co-creation, which she questions may inadvertently undermine the artist's unique insight and expertise. There is no doubt that consultation is key, but we need to assert art's position to challenge us, to be positively disruptive in relation to the status quo.

As Senie reminds us (2003), "public art is not a substitute for urban renewal or social work, although projects may address or include such functions" (page not specified). Senie argues that such expectation is often unreasonably placed on this practice, rather than dealing with the deeper problems from which such issues may derive. In this sense, we need to remind ourselves that art is not there to necessarily provide solutions (unlike, say, urban design), but to contribute new experiences and provoke thought. Nor can or should art necessarily please everyone: art history demonstrates quite clearly that the most ground-breaking art will regularly divide opinions. Yet, if an ambitious public art programme cannot be created purely out of consensus, this should nonetheless not undermine the importance of dialogue with and relevance to those who use the public space in which it takes place.

In addressing these epistemological questions, whether these can be fully answered or not, we shift the focus from what public space is to what it *does*: how it enables human dialogue, experiences and

cultural and creative expressions. If public art is not there to necessarily provide pragmatic solutions, it however has the potential for reacquainting ourselves with the human right to public space access and to the human need to congregate beyond the private dimension. By provoking thought, raising questions, deepening our sensorial experience of public space, art may be uniquely placed to remind us of the important role that we ourselves perform in the public sphere: there is no public space without public; there is no public without individuals coming together.

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BIOGRAPHY

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