

A Tram Ride You Would Talk About

Aleksandra Ianchenko

Tallinn University (Estonia), Åbo Akademi University (Finland)

aleksandraianchenko@tlu.ee

Abstract

As an artist and researcher for the project “Public Transport as Public Space,” my aim is to understand atmospheres on urban public transport and the ways in which they can be changed through performative public art practice. Indefinite yet powerful, atmospheres, which emerge in the relation between a perceived environment and perceiving bodies (Böhme 2017), can be created deliberately through aesthetic work and used as a tool for shaping certain experiences and behaviours in public space (Allen 2006). For instance, visually attractive public artworks permanently integrated into the public transport environment may create atmospheres of safety and comfort, navigating passengers through this regulated public space. On the other hand, on public transport, where unacquainted people must travel shoulder to shoulder, different atmospheres emerge not only through material modifications but also through unexpected encounters and events (Bissell 2010). In this sense, performative public art interventions can intentionally “drum up the ambience” (Thibaud 2015) and imbue the atmosphere of commutes with elements that are surprising and out of the ordinary. This paper outlines some of my art projects, which aim to carefully disrupt casual rides on public transport by creating moments of strangeness and humour.

Keywords: public transport, atmosphere, public art, public space

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Introduction

After starting off as a painter, I expanded the scope of my artistic practice to organizing exhibitions, participatory installations, and situations in public space. Similarly, my interest in public transport has grown from on-the-spot sketches to performative interventions at transport stops and on vehicles. These interventions have become a method in my doctoral research in the frame of the project “PUTSPACE: Public Transport as Public Space” at Tallinn University, Estonia, and Abo Akademi University in Turku, Finland. Using these creative methods, I investigate what the atmosphere is on public transport and how and to what extent it might be transformed through artistically initiated situations such as performative interventions.

Public transport is more than just an engineering system to be judged by its efficiency and utility. Likewise, it is more than just a means of sustainable urban development. Public transport can also be approached as a social and cultural phenomenon. Aspects of public transport that go beyond the purely technological are conceptualized within the new paradigm of mobilities. This has broadened the understanding of mobility beyond a mere transition from A to B to meaningful socio-cultural activity (Cresswell 2006). Through the lens of mobility studies, the mundane experience of using public transport is seen as a spatio-temporal event that is crucial for the formation of the self, the understanding of others, and the perception of the built environment (Jensen 2009). Furthermore, public transport is not only a public good and a means of accessing other public places; it is also itself a mobile public space (Paget-Seekins and Tironi 2016). However, unlike other urban public spaces such as squares or cafes, public transport is a strictly regulated and physically constrained space of intensive movements. In turn, such a confined and ordered space provokes different social interactions — from verbal conversations to a dispassionate blasé attitude — between unacquainted people who have to travel shoulder to shoulder. In other words, public transport is characterized by “extraordinary intimacy with others and intense materiality, where bodies are pressed up against each other, seats are shared, and personal boundaries are constantly negotiated” (Wilson 2010, p. 635). These features of public transport as public space — physical confinement and close proximity alongside regulated intensive movements — create various atmospheres.

Atmospheres are ambiguous entities balanced between subjective perception (they are sensed in particular places) and objective conditions (places generate particular atmospheres). As something “between presence and absence, between subject and object/subject and between the definite and indefinite” (Anderson 2009, p. 77), atmospheres are relational and emerge in a combination of impersonal affects and personal emotions. As affects, they flow, instantly filling the space, and evoke an emotional response in those who are absorbed into them. Engaging all the senses, atmospheres act on the pre-cognitive level (they are felt before they are understood) and can powerfully impact experiences and behaviours in public space (Allen 2006). Moreover, atmospheres can be made intentionally by setting up specific conditions in which they may emerge. Due to such conditions, which are set up though a broad range of aesthetic work, spaces can be *tuned* with specific atmospheres (e.g., through manipulations of light and sound, stage designers charge the theatre space with the atmosphere attuned to the performance [Böhme 2017]). Beyond the theatre walls, this task is taken up by urban designers who are responsible for the “setting of ambiance” in various public spaces and can “endow the territory with a certain character, a specific

mood, an emotional and existential value” (Thibaud 2015, p. 42). Furthermore, such ambient effects on public spaces can also be created by public artworks (e.g., the spatial public art installation turns a city lane into an immersive space, creating a sense of safety and increasing communication between strangers [Hillary and Sumartojo 2014]). Due to the intensity of traffic and the flow of passengers, atmospheres on public transport are always in motion: they coalesce and dissipate, mix, and supersede one another. They are shaped by many factors: sensory and material characteristics of transit space, the time of day of the commute, events, and encounters (Bissell 2010). While some atmospheres may arise naturally (e.g., the irritation caused by unpleasant smells or unexpected delays), others can be engineered by the design of transit spaces, which often become a site for various public artworks. Whether permanent or temporary, these artworks are physically integrated into the transport environment and often aim to make it visually attractive as well as to guide passengers, enhancing their feelings of safety and comfort (Abramson 2010). However, some of these spatial public artworks may act as aesthetic disruptions of the regulated flow of passengers, provoking changes in behaviour and eliciting social interactions in transit (Martin et al. 2013, p. 148). A similar disruptive effect can be achieved by performative art projects on public transport, including socially engaged programs, performances, and artistic interventions. Thus, while some public artworks *keep up the ambience* — that is, maintain a certain vibe on public transport as a backdrop — others can *drum up the ambience* “thanks to occasional, exceptional, extraordinary events” (Thibaud 2015, p. 46). However, to what extent should the atmosphere of such a specific public space as public transport be artistically drummed up?

Unexpectedly encountered outside conventional art places like galleries or museums, artistic elements can transform atmospheres on public transport by creating a moment of enchantment or “the sense of magical serendipity” (Young 2014, p. 148). In turn, by interfering with casual behaviours on the move, such moments of wonder can prompt passengers to talk to each other. In other words, artistically enchanted atmospheres can act as a powerful tool to boost social interactions in transit. For example, *Tram Buskers Tour* (2016), by the Czech artist Kateřina Šedá, aimed to turn trams into “a meeting place where passengers can experience *something out of the ordinary* and share it with others” (Šedá n.d.; emphasis added). Furthermore, by creating such extraordinary moments, artists can encourage passengers to “register their passage as a complex activity, simultaneously public and private, and culturally, socially, and even morally loaded” (Wilkie 2015, p. 17). However, many passengers use public transport not only by choice but also out of necessity — and sometimes their commutes take considerable time. Some of them use this liminal time-space between home and work for reading, studying, or simply daydreaming; in other words, they curate their passage, deciding what they want to do in transit (Bissell 2018). In this sense, artistic interventions may violate passengers’ right to be left in peace during the ride. Moreover, the confined space on public transport vehicles makes artistically tuned atmospheres hardly avoidable and potentially disturbing for those who prefer to concentrate on their own thoughts. Therefore, understanding the power of artistic disruptions, in my art practice I try to be attentive to the particular conditions in transit and accordingly modulate the intensity of an atmosphere I can create through my actions. Thus they may vary from collective dinners and creative workshops on tram stops (*Keep Your Ticket with You*, 2017) to almost unnoticeable manipulations with household objects on board a tram (*Tramwarm*,

2019). My public works reveal that in terms of creating an atmosphere, subtle performative interventions on a smaller scale might be as powerful as loud and festive actions. Even small, slightly out-of-the-ordinary artistic gestures may transform a familiar passage, such as the simple question “When does the tram arrive?” when it is asked far away from tram tracks (*Waiting for the Tram*, 2020). Such minor gestures respect the right of passengers to be left alone with their own thoughts but, at the same time, create a situation in which artistically charged atmospheres can be *potentially* experienced. In other words, by carefully intervening in casual public transport rides, I intend to create the *potential* for passengers to experience unusual atmospheres, offering them a ride they would talk about.

Keep Your Ticket with You (2017)

Together with the research project “Gorod Inache,” I organized a performative public art project to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the tram service in my hometown of Irkutsk, Eastern Siberia. Under the title *Keep Your Ticket with You* (taken from the standard announcement on the tram), eight performative interventions took place on the stops along the oldest and longest tram line in the city. Each performance was thematically connected with the name of the tram stop (e.g., reading aloud poems by Vladimir Mayakovsky at the stop named after him). Some interventions were hardly noticeable (e.g., the beeping sound of the congratulations encrypted in Morse code). Others were open for participation, such as the origami-bird workshop at the Seagull stop or the dinner at Griboedov (which literally means “eating mushrooms”). Additionally, those who kept their tickets could exchange them for the cards from my previous project *City Tram Line: A Graphic Diary* (2016), which bore sketches I made at each of the 30 stops of the given tram line.

This one-day action was not commissioned by city or public transport authorities. However, as organizers, we informed the officials beforehand in order to avoid potential conflicts. Moreover, the official permission provided good media coverage that attracted an audience who does not usually use trams—some of them took a ride specifically to attend the performances. Nevertheless, we tried to retain the playful, experimental spirit of the self-organized artistic activity and make our performances surprising but not disturbing to tram users. By staging unexpected situations along the tram line, we intended to offer passengers unusual artistic experiences as well as to remind them of the tram anniversary in an unobtrusive manner.

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Performers: Julia Fadeeva, Evgenia Skaredneva, Rinat Ishmukhametov, George Ionin, Nadezhda Prokopenko, Katerina Karelina, Daria Khomyakova, Nastya Rubtsova, Maria Korotkevich, Igor Zakharyev, Ksenia Vlasova.

Photo credits: Svetlana Khairova.



Figure 1. "Healing" the pavilion



Figure 2. Curious passengers on buses passing by



Figure 3. Receiving a card



Figure 4. Origami workshop



Figure 5. Reading Mayakovsky's poetry



Figure 6. Dinner at the end of performances

Krasnostudensky Passage (2017)

Built in the 1930s, a beautiful pavilion stands at the Krasnostudensky Passage tram stop along one of the oldest routes in Moscow, tram line 27. In autumn 2017, the pavilion was in bad condition—the windows were boarded up, and the interior contained litter. One day, I went to the stop and talked to people while they were waiting for the tram. In a play on the title of the stop, which literally means “red student,” I was dressed in red and, holding my student ID, asked people to take a photo of me with the pavilion in the background. My request sparked conversations—people shared stories about the pavilion that ranged from tall tales (“It was built by Peter the Great”) to regrets about its poor condition.

My intention was not only to learn more about the history of the pavilion but also to create a situation that someone could potentially recognize as an artistic gesture. However, even if the action was not exposed as a performance, my question could potentially direct passengers’ attention to the pavilion and their tram journeys. Furthermore, my seemingly casual choice to dress in red may have raised questions in the minds of those who noticed this reference to the name of the stop. However, today it would not be surprising to be asked to take a photo at this tram stop, because the pavilion was restored as an object of cultural heritage a year after my intervention.

Photo credits: Aleksandra Ianchenko.



Figure 7-8. By the end of the action, I collected around 30 photos taken by passengers.

Tramwarm (2019)

This experimental performance on the tram in Tallinn I directed together with Estonian artist Erki Kasemets (Polygon Theater) and his class of five first-year students at the Estonian Academy of Arts.

To examine the line between the public and the private, students carried random household objects (such as a carpet, footstool, mirror, and folded chair), which they (re)assembled into mobile installations at the stops and on board the tram. These installations were activated by performative gestures (e.g., reading a book, sitting on the chair, etc.). In this sense, objects also became active participants and revealed their presence through *ekstases*, “tone and emanation... the atmosphere radiated by things” (Böhme 2017, p. 63). Furthermore, reflecting on public transport as an ordered system,

the choreography of the performance was based on the tram schedule, when students got on and off the tram one after another at different stops, challenging the perception of commuting as transiting from A to B.

While on board a tram, the students acted as if they were casually transporting furniture, merging their actions with the ordinary. However, by skirting the edge of being recognizable as art, these actions subtly invigorated the atmosphere of the tram ride with strange, *unheimlich* elements. Moreover, some passengers did notice these elements and—perhaps feeling the change of atmosphere on board—reacted with a smile. Eliciting such reactions was our intention. As one of the students said, the action was successful if at least one person then went home and said: “Hey! You’ll never guess what I saw on the tram! There were some people, someone was reading a newspaper, and another one put a carpet on the tram floor...”

Curators: Erki Kasemets, Aleksandra Ianchenko

Performers: Aleksandra Ianchenko, Milla-Mona Andres, Linda Mai Kari, Anita Kremm, Kristel Zimmer, Liisamari Viik

Photo credits: Tauri Tuvikene.



Figure 9. Gathering on the back of the tram

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Figure 10. Reading a newspaper



Figure 11. Installation on the tram stop



Figure 12. Emanating homey atmospheres



Figure 13. Traveling with a private chair

Waiting for the Tram (2020)

Inspired by the tram infrastructure partially completed in the 1970s to connect Lasnamäe, Tallinn's most populous district, with the city center, artist Anton Polsky and I created a temporary tram stop on one of the bridges over Laagna Road. While the tram itself is not operational, the infrastructure intended for it is still visible; several bridges and stairs to stations have been completed. On one of these, we placed a sign indicating that the imaginary tram would stop there. This became an ad hoc fake station where we asked local passers-by a simple but provocative question: "When does the tram arrive?"

This question produced the effect of triangulation, a process in which strangers are prompted to talk to each other (Martin et al. 2013), and interrupted the regular passage of pedestrians on the bridge. Many of them shared their thoughts about the unbuilt tram line, admitting that they still hope for it to be completed, even though an efficient bus service already exists. Although it did not take place directly on public transport vehicles, this action encouraged people to imagine what it would be like if the tram line were operational. Finally, the action not only prompted people to talk about their potential rides on the imaginary tram but also sparked public discussions in the local media (Delfi 2020).

Photo credits: Tauri Tuvikene.



Figure 14-15. Temporary tram stop on Saarepiiga Bridge over Laagna Road

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