

The Journal of Public Space is the first, international, interdisciplinary, academic, open access journal entirely dedicated to public space. It speaks different languages and is open to embrace diversity, inconvenient dialogues and untold stories, from multidisciplinary fields and all countries, especially from those that usually do not have voice, overcoming the Western-oriented approach that is leading the current discourse.

As a proper public space, The Journal of Public Space is free, accessible and inclusive, providing a platform for emerging and consolidated researchers; it is intended to foster research, showcase best practices and inform discussion about the more and more important issues related to public spaces in our changing and evolving societies.

ISSN 2206-9658



<http://www.journalpublicspace.org>

The Journal of Public Space

2022 | Vol. 7 n. 3

Art and Activism in Public Space

Editors

Luisa Bravo, Maggie McCormick, Fiona Hillary

Founder



City Space
Architecture

Partner

UN HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

in cooperation with



School of Architecture
THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG



EDITORIAL TEAM

Founder, Editor in Chief

Luisa Bravo, City Space Architecture, Italy

Associate Editors (2021-)

Cecilia De Marinis, Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia (IAAC), Spain

Manfredo Manfredini, University of Auckland, New Zealand

Dorotea Ottaviani, University of Bologna, Italy

Scientific Board

Davisi Boontharm, Meiji University, Japan

Simone Brott, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Julie-Anne Carroll, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Margaret Crawford, University of California Berkeley, United States of America

Philip Crowther, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Simone Garagnani, University of Bologna, Italy

Pietro Garau, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

Carl Grodach, Monash University, Australia

Chye Kiang Heng, National University of Singapore, Singapore

Maurice Hartevelde, Delft University of Technology, Netherlands

Fiona Hillary, RMIT University, Australia

Aseem Inam, Cardiff University, United Kingdom

Setha Low, The Graduate Center, City University of New York, United States of America

Miquel Martí, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Spain

Alessandro Melis, University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom

Darko Radović, Keio University, Japan

Estanislau Roca, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Spain

Joaquín Sabate, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Spain

Robert Saliba, American University of Beirut, Lebanon

Ellen Marie Sæthre-McGuirk, Nord University, Norway

Martin Zebracki, University of Leeds, United Kingdom

Strategic Advisory Board

Cecilia Andersson, UN-Habitat Global Public Space Programme, Kenya

Tigran Haas, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden

Maggie McCormick, RMIT University, Australia

Michael Mehaffy, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden

Laura Petrella, UN-Habitat Global Public Space Programme, Kenya

Hendrik Tieben, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Advisory Board for Research into Action

Ethan Kent, PlacemakingX, United States of America
Gregor Mews, Urban Synergies Group, Australia
Luis Alfonso Saltos Espinoza, Observatorio Ciudadano por el Derecho a la Ciudad y Espacios Públicos de Guayaquil, Ecuador
Laura Sobral, Instituto A Cidade Precisa de Você [The City Needs You Institute], Brasil
Insaf Ben Othman Hamrouni, Cεcumene Studio, Ireland, Tunisia and Egypt

Section Editors

Beitske Boonstra, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands
Luke Hespanhol, University of Sydney, Australia
Fiona Hillary, RMIT University, Australia
Jeroen Laven, Placemaking Europe, Netherlands
Maggie McCormick, RMIT University, Australia
Ellen Marie Sæthre-McGuirk, Nord University, Norway

Special series ‘Art and Activism in Public Space’

Cameron Bishop, Deakin University, Australia
Luisa Bravo, City Space Architecture, Italy
Catherine Clover, RMIT University, Australia
Henning Eichinger, Reutlingen University, Germany
Ruth Fazakerley, University of South Australia, Australia
Fiona Hillary, RMIT University, Australia
Sophie Jerram, Letting Space and Urban Dream Brokerage, New Zealand
Maggie McCormick, RMIT University, Australia
Daniel Palmer, RMIT University, Australia
Monique Redmond, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand
Ellen Marie Sæthre-McGuirk, Nord University, Norway
Jacek Ludwig Scarso, London Metropolitan University, United Kingdom
Amy Spears, RMIT University, Australia

Assistant Editor

Zoë Atkinson Fiennes (Vol. 2 n. 3, 2017 / Vol. 4 n. 1, 2019 / Vol. 4 n. 2, 2019)
Merham M. Keleg (Vol. 6 n. 1, 2021)

Journal Manager

Luisa Bravo, City Space Architecture, Italy

Correspondents and Peer Reviewers

Europe and Middle East

Galal Abada, Ain Shams University, Egypt
Gem Barton, Brighton University, United Kingdom
Michael Barke, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, United Kingdom
Simon Bell, Estonian University of Life Sciences, Estonia
Pedro Ressano Garcia, Universidade Lusófona, Portugal
Konstantinos Ioannidis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

Marjut Kirjakka, Aalto University, Finland
Yoav Lerman, Tel Aviv University, Israel
Nicola Marzot, TU Delft, Netherlands
Fabiano Micocci, University of Thessaly, Greece
Vitor Oliveira, University of Porto, Portugal
Lakshmi Priya Rajendran, University College London, United Kingdom
Yodan Rofe, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel
Massimo Santanicchia, Iceland Academy of the Arts, Iceland
Goran Vodicka, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom
Katharine Willis, Plymouth University, United Kingdom
Parisa Ziaesaeidi, Erfan Institute of Higher Education, Iran

America

Camilo Vladimir de Lima Amaral, Universidade Federal de Goias, Brazil
Roberto Andrés, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil
Deland Chan, Stanford University, United States of America
Dave Colangelo, Portland State University, United States of America
Amir Gohar, University of California Berkeley, United States of America
Thomas Fowler, California Polytechnic State University, United States of America
Maria Goula, Cornell University, United States of America
Adrian Gras-Velazquez, Swarthmore College, United States of America
Matthew D. Lamb, Pennsylvania State University, United States of America
Marieta Maciel, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil
Leonardo Parra, Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia
Renato Rego, Universidade Estadual de Maringá - UEM, Brazil

Asia

Pak Damrongsak, Thammasat University, Thailand
Nga Nguyen, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Bing Wang, Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture, China
Zhen Xu, Nanjing Forestry University, China

Africa

Sahar Attia, Cairo University, Egypt
Izak van Zyl, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa

Australia and New Zealand

Christopher Brisbin, University of South Australia, Australia
Liz Brogden, Queensland University of Technology, Australia
Martin Bryant, University of Technology Sydney, Australia
Glenda Caldwell, Queensland University of Technology, Australia
Philippa Carnemolla, University of Technology Sydney, Australia
Debra Cushing, Queensland University of Technology, Australia
Emilio Garcia, University of Auckland, New Zealand
Morten Gjerde, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
Kai Gu, University of Auckland, New Zealand
Daniel O'Hare, Bond University, Australia
Anoma Kumarasuriyar, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Manfredo Manfredini, University of Auckland, New Zealand
Michael Marriott, Queensland University of Technology, Australia
Ari Mattes, University of Notre Dame, Australia
Linda Matthews, University of Technology Sydney, Australia
John Mongard, The Designbank, Australia
Milica Muminović, University of Canberra, Australia
Kaan Ozgun, University of Queensland, Australia

Mark Pennings, Queensland University of Technology, Australia
Gavin Perin, University of Technology Sydney, Australia
Helena Piha, Queensland University of Technology, Australia
Dorina Pojani, University of Queensland, Australia
Annabel Pretty, Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand
Paul Sanders, Deakin University, Australia
Leigh Shutter, Griffith University, Australia
Thomas Sigler, University of Queensland, Australia
Claudia Justino Taborda, Queensland University of Technology, Australia
Mark Taylor, University of Newcastle, Australia
Margaret Ward, Griffith University, Australia
Yannis Zavoleas, University of Newcastle, Australia

Privacy statement

The names and email addresses entered in The Journal of Public Space's website will be used exclusively for the stated purposes of the journal and will not be made available for any other purpose or to any other party.

Publication frequency

The Journal of Public Space is published 3 times per year. One or more special issues, focusing on specific topics, could be published every year.

“Public space in cities is a common good, meant to be open, inclusive and democratic, a fundamental human right for everybody.”

Dr Luisa Bravo
The Journal of Public Space, *Founder and Editor in Chief*
City Space Architecture, *Founding Member and President*
(from the statement submitted at the 26th UN-Habitat Governing Council held in Nairobi, Kenya, 8-12 May 2017)

FOCUS AND SCOPE

The Journal of Public Space is the first, international, interdisciplinary, academic, open access journal entirely dedicated to public space.

Established on a well-consolidated global network of scholars and professionals, The Journal of Public Space is committed to expand current scholarship by offering a global perspective and providing the opportunity for unheard countries to speak up and to discuss neglected as well as emerging topics that are usually sidelined in mainstream knowledge.

The Journal of Public Space is addressing social sciences and humanities as a major field, and is interested also in attracting scholars from several disciplines. It will perform as a scholarly journal but also as an interdisciplinary platform of discussion and exchange by scholars, professionals, organizations, artists, activists and citizens, whose activities are related to public space.

The Journal of Public Space will be enriched by hosting papers on design projects, art performances and social practices, fostering civic engagement and non-expert knowledge.

TOPICS

Authors are welcome to submit original research articles dealing with themes relating to the vision of the journal, which may include, but are not confined to:

SPACE

Architecture
Urban Planning
Urban Design
Urban Morphology
Urban Resilience
Landscape architecture
Interior design
Interactive and visual design
Art
City transformation
Infrastructure
Environment
Ecology
Climate change

SOCIETY

Gender
Human scale
People
Everyday life
Social engagement
Health and safety
Perception and senses
Human rights
Social justice
Education
Heritage
History
Culture
Geography
Anthropology
Ethnography
Community empowerment
Migrations
Conflicts
Inclusion/Exclusion
Informality
Sub and fringe cultures

SYSTEMS

Economy
Political power
Governance
Law and regulations
Public policies
Private sector/interest
Developing countries
Management and maintenance
Digital/Virtual world
Technology
Media
Third sector
Decision-making process

POLICIES

Peer Review Process

A double-blind peer review process, based on a distinguished board of editors and editorial advisors, ensures the quality and high standards of research papers. Each paper is assessed by two reviewers and any identifying information in relation to the author is removed during the review process. Reviewers follow an evaluation framework and recommendation guidelines to ensure objectivity and fairness.

Submitted articles should not have been previously published. If publication or dissemination through presentation has occurred, then the article should acknowledge this and pay due credit to the original source.

Read more: <https://www.journalpublicspace.org/index.php/jps/peer-review-process>

Publication Ethics Statement

The Journal of Public Space aligns itself with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) best practice guidelines for dealing with ethical issues in journal publishing and has adopted the COPE guidelines which the journal members (Scientific Board, Advisory Boards, Editorial Board and the Journal Manager) have agreed meet the purposes and objectives of the Journal - <http://publicationethics.org/>

COPE provides international standards for authors of scholarly research publications and describes responsible research reporting practice. They may be summarised as follows:

- the research being reported should have been conducted in an ethical and responsible manner and should comply with all relevant legislation;
- researchers should present their results clearly, honestly, and without fabrication, falsification or inappropriate data manipulation;
- researchers should strive to describe their methods clearly and unambiguously so that their findings can be confirmed by others;
- researchers should adhere to publication requirements that submitted work is original, is not plagiarised, and has not been published elsewhere;
- authors should take collective responsibility for submitted and published work;
- the authorship of research publications should accurately reflect individuals' contributions to the work and its reporting;
- funding sources and relevant conflicts of interest should be disclosed.

Open Access Policy

The Journal of Public Space is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. It provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Article processing charges (APCs)

The Journal of Public Space does not require authors to pay any article processing charges (APCs) when submitting an article for possible publication.

CONTACT

Publisher

City Space Architecture
non-profit cultural association
Via Paolo Giovanni Martini 26/d
40134 Bologna, ITALY
jps@cityspacearchitecture.org
www.cityspacearchitecture.org

Partner

UN-Habitat / United Nations
Human Settlements Program
Nairobi, KENYA
www.unhabitat.org

in cooperation with

KTH Royal Institute of Technology
Centre for the Future of Places
Stockholm, SWEDEN
<https://www.kth.se/en>
<https://www.cfp.abe.kth.se/>

RMIT University
Melbourne, AUSTRALIA
<https://www.rmit.edu.au/>

The Chinese University of Hong Kong
School of Architecture
HONG KONG SAR
<http://www.arch.cuhk.edu.hk/>

with the IT support of

Genius Saeculi srls
Bologna, ITALY
<http://www.genius-saeculi.com/>

CALL FOR PAPERS

The Journal of Public Space welcomes full papers for 2023 issues, to be published in April, August and December.

Submissions will be ongoing throughout the year.

Submission can be made by using the OJS platform by registering online. If you are already a registered author you can log in using your username and password;

For any questions, please send an email to the Editor in Chief Dr Luisa Bravo at this email address: submission@journalpublicspace.org

Before submitting, please read:

- the Focus and Scope of the journal
- the Author Guidelines

A short paper should be around 3.000 words, a full paper should be between 5.000 and 8.000 words. The word limit includes notes and bibliographical references.

An abstract of about 300 words with up to five keywords is also mandatory.

<https://www.journalpublicspace.org/>

Art and Activism in Public Space

Editors

Luisa Bravo, Maggie McCormick, Fiona Hillary

Vol. 7 n. 3 | 2022

S P E C I A L S E R I E S

Previous issues

Vol 5 No 4 (2020)

<https://www.journalpublicspace.org/index.php/jps/issue/view/77>

Vol 4 No 3 (2019)

<https://www.journalpublicspace.org/index.php/jps/issue/view/72>

Vol 3 No 2 (2018)

<https://www.journalpublicspace.org/index.php/jps/issue/view/68>

The Journal of Public Space

ISSN 2206-9658

2022 | Vol. 7 n. 3

<https://www.journalpublicspace.org>



Cover image: Emma Anna, *IMAG_NE* in situ at Tascott foreshore, NSW Central Coast region (2020). Courtesy: Therese Elsey Photography.

DISCLAIMER

The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this journal do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries, or regarding its economic system or degree of development. The analysis, conclusions and recommendations of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme. Reference in this journal of any specific commercial products, brand names, processes, or services, or the use of any trade, firm, or corporation name does not constitute endorsement, recommendation, or favouring by UN-Habitat or its officers, nor does such reference constitute an endorsement of UN-Habitat.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

- Creative Practices in the Public Realm 1-4
Luisa Bravo, Maggie McCormick and Fiona Hillary

ART AND ACTIVISM

- Safety in Numbers. 5-24
Reflecting on the work of Artichoke as ‘Adaptor-Disruptor’ in Reclaiming Public Space
Jacek Ludwig Scarso, Kirsten Jeske Thompson
- Creating a Network of Places with Participatory Actions across Cities and Cultures 25-44
Leandro Madrazo, Tadeja Zupančič, Burak Pak, Maria Irene Aparicio
- Public Space, Public Art, and The Revolution. 45-64
Reflections on Sudan’s Nile Spring 2019 Sit-In Space
Ibrahim Zakaria Bahreldin
- Selflessness is The Highest Achievement. 65-86
Jenny Holzer Whispering against the City Walls”
Andrea Marsili

PORTFOLIO

- Activism, Participation and Art during the Pandemic. 87-100
The Project Back to the Future of Public Space
Dorotea Ottaviani, Cecilia De Marinis / Rhizoma Design and Research Lab
- Reinhabiting in Huaniao Island. 101-116
Creative Practices work on Challenging ‘Culture Aphasia’ Issues in Rural Regeneration
Ye (Sherry) Liu

RMIT UNIVERSITY: Master of Arts (Art in Public Space)

Finding Children of Compost Symbionts. 117-130
An exploration of hopes and care in the damaged world
Clara M. Y. Chan

Evocations: Honouring the Memory of Women Artists 131-142
Cynthia Granados Posada

ACT_VISION: Inspiring Change and Acts of Creative Visioning 143-156
Emma Anna

Fieldwork, A Trilogy 157-166
Ben Morieson

EDITORIAL

Creative Practices in the Public Realm

Luisa Bravo

City Space Architecture, Italy

luisa.bravo@cityspacearchitecture.org

Maggie McCormick, Fiona Hillary

RMIT University, School of Art, Australia

maggie.mccormick@rmit.edu.au | fiona.hillary@rmit.edu.au

Abstract

This ‘Art and Activism in Public Space’ special issue of The Journal of Public Space presents a spectrum of practices and theoretical reflections on creative practices in public space, across a diverse range of environments including in the Sudan, China, Australia, United Kingdom, Mexico, Cuba, Italy and Colombia.

Articles and portfolios included in the issue are not asked to respond to a specific theme. The intention is to reflect on what emerges at the intersection of art-based research, creative practice, theoretical frameworks around contemporary public practice, and the changing nature of public space. Through articles and portfolios, the reader is drawn into both familiar and unfamiliar scenarios.

Keywords: creative practices, public realm, art-based research, theoretical frameworks

To cite this article:

Bravo, L., McCormick, M. and Hillary, F. (2022) “Creative Practices in the Public Realm”, The Journal of Public Space, 7(3), pp. 1–4. doi: 10.32891/jps.v7i3.1660.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

The 'Art and Activism in Public Space' is a special series of The Journal of Public Space. Issues of the series focus on the specific interconnection between art practice and public space, and are co-edited by Luisa Bravo, Maggie McCormick and Fiona Hillary as a result of the collaboration between The Journal of Public Space (developed by City Space Architecture in partnership with UN-Habitat) and RMIT University (MAPS Master of Arts-Art in Public Space, School of Art and CAST Contemporary Art and Social Transformation research group).

As in earlier issues, Vol. 7 no. 3 2022, the fourth of the series (previous issues have been published in 2018, 2019, 2020), presents a spectrum of practices and theoretical reflections on creative practices in public space, across a diverse range of public environments including in the Sudan, China, Australia, United Kingdom, Mexico, Cuba, Italy and Colombia.

Articles and portfolios included in the issue are not asked to respond to a specific theme. The intention is to reflect on what emerges at the intersection of art-based research, creative practice, theoretical frameworks around contemporary public practice, and the changing nature of public space. Through articles and portfolios, the reader is drawn into both familiar and unfamiliar scenarios.

Both peer reviewed articles and portfolios reveal, through different dimensions and explorations, a series of emergent and ongoing issues around placelessness, practice in a COVID-affected environment, civil activism and the struggle for authority in public space and emerging art practices in the public realm. Questions addressed across these practices include in the portfolio section concerns for human and non-human entanglements emerging from climate crisis; explorations of a Mexican feminist perspective on women in art; art as a form of cultural regeneration and democratising colonised public space.

Emergent and established practitioners are invited from alumni of the Master of Arts – Art in Public Space (MAPS) program at RMIT University (Australia) to contribute to the issue. The MAPS degree encourages active collaboration between interdisciplinary practitioners and theoreticians, industry, and communities to address critical issues in global public space. As one of the few post-graduate programs to focus specifically on art practice in public space as a skill-set in its own right MAPS is a worldwide leader in the field.

Celebration of the tenth anniversary of City Space Architecture

This issue of the special series Art and Activism in Public Space and its launch, scheduled in the Spring 2023, are expected to anticipate the celebration of the tenth anniversary of City Space Architecture, the publisher of The Journal of Public Space, on 13 May 2023. In the span of just a decade City Space Architecture has established a series of successful initiatives that are aimed at expanding knowledge and awareness on the importance of public space culture. In addition to The Journal of Public Space the most relevant are:

- MaPS. Mastering Public Space, a web-magazine hosting a collection of public space news in open access format from influential and reliable sources, curated by a cross-disciplinary team of researchers and practitioners - <https://www.masteringpublicspace.org/>. The web-magazine includes a dedicated section on creative practices;

- Museo Spazio Pubblico / Public Space Museum, a transdisciplinary, inclusive and plural practice that experiments methodologies at the intersection of art, architecture and technology with the aim to investigate the complexity of public space culture - <https://www.museospaziopubblico.it/>. The Museum is the artistic headquarters of City Space Architecture in Bologna, Italy;
- Public Space Academy, the first, free, interdisciplinary educational program aimed at establishing a new approach to urban complexity built around public space, developed in partnership with the Ove Arup Foundation - <https://www.publicspaceacademy.org/>

The Public Space Academy was launched at the 11th World Urban Forum in Katowice, in June 2022, during a training event promoted by City Space Architecture¹. It will start in 2023 as an online and open initiative and will provide introductory and advanced training on public space, engaging the best and most influential scholars, professionals, and urban innovators, from different backgrounds and expertise. Online contents, available for free on a customized OpenEdX platform, will be complemented with several face-to-face activities, such as talks, public dialogues, meetings, workshops, and exhibitions, in different cities worldwide, engaging Universities, cultural institutions and NGOs affiliated to City Space Architecture's global network. The Public Space Academy is aimed at inspiring and empowering a new generation of urban thinkers and doers who are willing to become agents of change in their own cities and communities, providing:

- theoretical introduction to public space complexity through advanced analytical skills both for academic research and for effective design;
- tools for the definition of a comprehensive urban strategy for effective local implementation, that is built around humans and their life in the public domain, putting public space as a priority in the regional and local urban agenda.



Figure 1. Launch of the Public Space Academy at the 11th World Urban Forum in Katowice during a training event coordinated by Luisa Bravo (on the right) with (from left to right) Hendrik Tieben (Chinese University of Hong Kong), Jose Chong (UN-Habitat) and Setha Low (City University of New York, the Graduate Center).

¹ Read the report: <https://www.cityspacearchitecture.org/?e=70>



Figure 2. Launch of the Public Space Academy at the 11th World Urban Forum in Katowice. The training event was attended by more than 50 participants.

The Academy will address major contemporary challenges, such as global commitments included in the Agenda 2030 with the Sustainable Development Goals and in the New Urban Agenda adopted at Habitat III, the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Development that took place in Quito in 2016.

It is expected to attract significant interest in the mid-term and later, in the long-term, to bring attention on public space through a more rounded perspective, at the political, social and economic level, tackling issues of democratic engagement, social equity, inclusion and civil rights.

Learners attending the Academy will develop skills on how to deal with urban and social issues and to define priorities for public space design and will acquire expertise to present and discuss reasons and objectives of a public space strategy integrated in local, regional and national policies.

The Academy will include contents on creative practices in the public realm and will provide training opportunities on art-based research, exploring as well the performative dimension of public space, through seminars, keynote lectures and workshops, both online and in presence.

Acknowledgment

As ever, the 'Art and Activism in Public Space' editors would like to thank the writers and practitioners who have contributed to this issue and to the team of peer reviewers for their time and expertise.

Safety in Numbers. Reflecting on the work of Artichoke as ‘Adaptor- Disruptor’ in Reclaiming Public Space

Jacek Ludwig Scarso, Kirsten Jeske Thompson

London Metropolitan University, The School of Art, Architecture and Design, United Kingdom

j.scarso@londonmet.ac.uk | k.thompson1@londonmet.ac.uk

Abstract

As we navigate the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and face ever more complex challenges to our experience of the public sphere, the phrase ‘safety in numbers’ entails increasingly contradictory connotations. What is the role of large public space gatherings in rebuilding confidence in our use of public space and what creative and logistical strategies may be used to this end? This article represents the first in a series of studies, exploring the work of internationally acclaimed public art production company, Artichoke. A “reverse-engineering” focus is applied here, as we revisit three seminal projects across Artichoke’s fifteen-year body of work: respectively, *The Sultan’s Elephant* (2006), *Lumiere* (2009-ongoing) and *Processions* (2018). While there is no “standard” Artichoke work, these projects share important commonalities in relation to the potential of ephemeral public art events to adapt and disrupt our perception of public spaces. Each project achieved considerable impact, with audience numbers reaching hundreds of thousands and even millions through media dissemination: in doing so, Artichoke’s work has not only pioneered new forms of large-scale spectacular and participatory events, but also played a significant role in shaping policies for public art commissioning and realisation. Drawing on archival data, as much as on a range of anecdotal experiences provided by audience testimonials and interviews with Helen Marriage, Artichoke’s Artistic Director and CEO, the article aims to evaluate learnings and strategies that have allowed this company’s approach to be resilient and innovative in relation to public engagement. The projects explored here were mostly realised long before our cities were shaped by the unprecedented restrictions caused by the pandemic; yet, they nonetheless all had to deal with substantial logistical and creative challenges, deriving from complex safety measures and an ever-changing urban and cultural landscape. Looking back is here intended as a means to think ahead, as we consider key traits in Artichoke’s work: in particular, its continued adaptability, its fluid negotiation between artist-led expertise and participation, and its unique aesthetic in temporarily disrupting our relationship with the ‘soft city’.

Keywords: public art, participation, ephemeral art, mass gatherings, performance, soft city

To cite this article:

Scarso, J. L., Jeske Thompson, K. (2022) “Safety in Numbers. Reflecting on the work of Artichoke as ‘Adaptor-Disruptor’ in Reclaiming Public Space”, *The Journal of Public Space*, 7(3). pp. 5-24. doi: 10.32891/jps.v7i3.1488.

This article has been double blind peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



Figure 1. The Sultan's Elephant, Royal De Luxe, 2006. Produced by Artichoke in London. Photograph by Sophie Laslett. Courtesy of Artichoke.

The phrase 'safety in numbers' is a peculiar one in the English language: its once prolific use implies the reassurance that a collective presence makes us less vulnerable to impending dangers. As we emerge from the imposed physically insular conditions of COVID-19, we have increasingly come to terms with a paradoxical connotation to this phrase: we are not necessarily 'safer' in events featuring large numbers of people, but we do need such events to reclaim our confidence in and collective ownership of public spaces. In the two years of intermittent lockdowns we experienced across the globe, having been forced into a digital realm of communication, our own private spaces - the vignettes contained within our screens - have been exposed on public platforms; yet, these innermost spaces never felt more restrictive, making access to public space even more desirable. In this sense, Covid has potently reminded us of the importance of the physical public sphere, but its aftermath is not a straightforward one. The risk of

pandemics is now ever-present in our minds and is further combined with new and existing problems: a spiralling cost of living, the risk of terrorist and war attacks, the environmental crisis. Whether directly or not, all these factors contribute to an ever more complex experience of public space, in terms of access, civic responsibility and safety.

As Andrew Hewitt and Mel Jordan observe, performativity is a useful frame to gauge our understanding of publicness: “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 and Jordan, 2015, pp. 27-28).

Public art is dually situated within this debate, addressing both boundaries to engagement and disruption of perception. Hewitt and Jordan consider public art to include a wide range of practices, spanning institutionally commissioned work that takes place in the public sphere, as well as approaches more akin to public assembly and activism (2015, pp. 30-31). Within the broad scope of what we may understand as public art, in whichever medium it takes form and whether this is permanent or ephemeral, art can enter the performative arrangement of public space in different ways: it may simply validate an existing arrangement by affording an existing space with cultural status and aesthetic focus; or it may actively confront it by both radically adapting to it and creatively disrupting it, albeit within the necessary boundaries of security measures.

It is in the latter understanding of this performative arrangement that we find in the body of work by internationally acclaimed company Artichoke an interesting subject to research: one that brings together a renegotiation of public sphere, the context of mass gatherings and the ethos of artistic work that functions, we will argue here, as both adaptor and disruptor of a given performative arrangement. This study is the first in a series of long-term research endeavours, collaborating with Artichoke in contextualising their future work. From their fifteen-year portfolio, three projects with varied timelines have been selected to frame the discussion. The *zeitgeist* during which these interactive public art productions were staged is relevant considering that, while they were pre-Covid, they were susceptible to other instances of public risk – those inherent to logistics of crowd management and the continual threat of terrorist attacks in densely populated urban contexts.

Our selected case studies by Artichoke provide a stimulus for re-evaluating creative strategies previously adopted that make this company’s work both uniquely adaptable to a complex use of public spaces, as well as intentionally disruptive within these spaces. In this context, the terms ‘adaptor’ and ‘disruptor’ are deliberately provocative: by these, we mean the potential of an artistic work to both be resiliently tailorable to a given context, as well as positively destabilise the meaning of that context. A key aspect of this duality is the ephemerality of the work: Artichoke’s projects are largely live, temporary performances or displays that are intended not to permanently change an environment, but, rather, to alter its use for a given period of time through spectacular interventions. The scale of these interventions requires these to be meticulously planned and to be site-specifically customised to the locations used, but such scale also profoundly changes the experience of such locations, visibly disrupting their routines. While time-limited, these interventions are created with the aim for a lingering impact on the public’s lived experience in relation to the sites used. As Helen Marriage,

Artichoke's Artistic Director and CEO, states "art by Artichoke is about claiming space – the legitimacy of art disrupting the status quo and the idea of who has rights to public space; about challenging the orthodoxy of public authorities" (Marriage, 2021).

Focussed questions that guide our research include:

- In what ways have the case studies flexibly adapted to given public spaces and what can be learnt from the strategies, both logistical and artistic, that they have employed to do so?
- To what extent have Artichoke's projects enabled new understandings in public engagement and participation, beyond providing spectacular entertainment on a mass scale?
- What new learnings can be achieved in looking at how these projects have creatively disrupted given understandings of the public sphere?

Our methodology combines the analysis of quantifiable data shared by Artichoke from their archival documentation, relevant to our selected case studies, as well as subjective responses by the audience, which provide less measurable but equally insightful accounts of the impact of their work and the efficacy of the creative strategies adopted. This data is further supported by anecdotal information of the inherent challenges and standpoints behind each intervention, from the point of view of the producers and specifically two interviews with Marriage in 2021. Reflections are framed by contextual debates on the subjects of public art and the public sphere. A conclusive analysis combines insights gained from these case studies, evidencing parallels and contrasts across these and considering the implications of these in light of the research questions.

Artichoke: an Overview

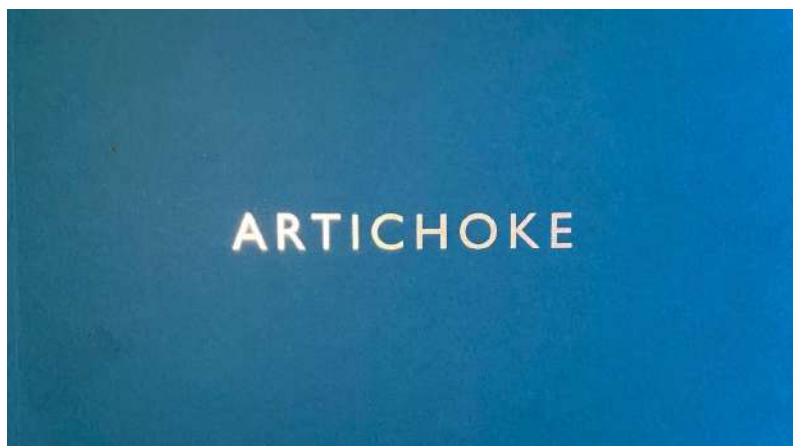


Figure 2. Photograph of the Artichoke brochure cover.

If buildings and infrastructure constitute the 'hard city', the *urbs*, then Artichoke infiltrates the spaces between buildings and the interactions in those spaces – the 'soft city', the *civitas*. The idea of the soft city is particularly relevant here, as it represents the ephemeral dimension of the urban context, precisely the one explored and subverted in Artichoke's own performative projects. Such projects highlight the fact

that each encounter we have with the city is as personal and unique as a fingerprint, as Jonathan Raban points out (Raban, 1998); furthermore, these projects directly engage with a dialogical understanding of social spaces as sites for exchange (Lefebvre, 1991). Here, a complex interplay takes place, combining the existent narratives imbued in the built environment (Psarra, 2009), with new imaginary ones that are creatively conceived in response to these, as we will see in the following paragraphs. In this sense, Artichoke's work can be seen in relation to Raban's concept of 'the city as melodrama', where a juxtaposition of freedoms and constraints exists, and where the city fabric provides a stage to engage the audience, promoting ephemeral interactions with the city's spaces, in which the latter are temporarily re-imagined through theatrical and artistic strategies.

Artichoke, a registered charity, commissions and produces expansive outdoor art experiences that started with its first show in 2006, Royal De Luxe's *The Sultan's Elephant*. Each commissioning process is conceived specifically for the event in question: selected artists are supported by the Artichoke production team in a collaborative realisation of their projects. Artichoke's shows cost considerable sums that are raised from scratch for each event, while overheads at Artichoke are mainly funded by Arts Council England. The events draw together live audiences reaching hundreds of thousands, and higher numbers still when measuring economic impact, which is amplified by media nationally and internationally, typically fetching a high return on investment. Productions at this ambitious scale involve extensive business plans, grant applications, event management planning and post-production evaluation reporting, as "Artichoke events set out to create a different world" (Artichoke, 2006) and to "both mark and make history" (ibid.). Our interviews with Helen Marriage provide insight into the many points of entry that are drawn together by the company's events, inviting interactions with city spaces through art and conveying the company's intention of claiming public space and the legitimacy of art in disrupting the status quo. Marriage explains that "the cultural value added, since its start in 2006, and the societal response have shown a shift since its founding principles of 15 years ago" (Marriage, 2021), enabling Artichoke to achieve considerable influence on the Arts Council and on the way that local councils, such as Liverpool City, work in relation to their public programming.

The case studies that we selected for this research include *The Sultan's Elephant* (2006), *Lumiere* (biennially 2009-2021) and *Processions* (2018), each of which is considered in relation to context, costs, public response, marketing, exposure and degrees of public interaction. Our aim is to provide an overview of these projects, in order to analyse these through a lens of commonality, across different time periods in the company's history and against the three research questions listed above. We are specifically interested in the ways in which the company has been able to creatively adapt to practical challenges – a process of "reverse engineering", as opposed to post-rationalising, that can inform strategies for future events.

Case Study I: *The Sultan's Elephant*

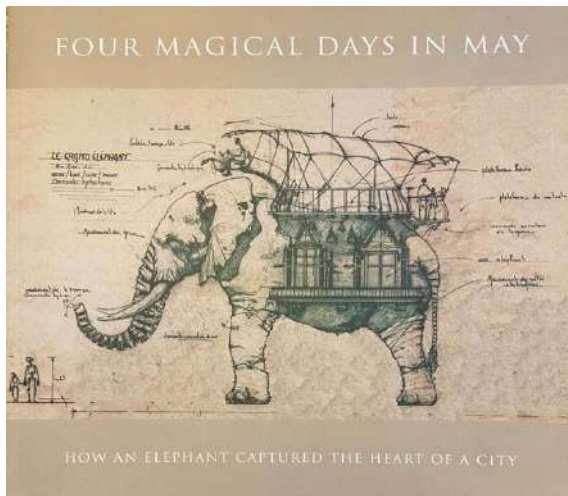


Figure 3. Photograph of *The Sultan's Elephant* brochure cover. Produced by Artichoke in London.



Figure 4. *The Sultan's Elephant*, Royal De Luxe, 2006. Produced by Artichoke in London. Photograph by Sophie Laslett.

The Sultan's Elephant sought to bring magic to the streets of London, “working with artists to create a work of the imagination, rather than a ceremony or protest” (Helen Marriage cited in Webb, 2006, p. 5). In collaboration with Royal de Luxe, *The Sultan's Elephant* was held in London between the 4th and 7th of May 2006 and fetched an audience of one million people, as estimated by the BBC. The total project cost was £1.2million, with a return of investment through direct spend by the audience of £28.7million. The bar was set high for Artichoke's future projects: monumental-sized marionettes of a girl and an elephant, this one with a height of 11.2 metres and with ears made from 80m² of leather, roamed the main streets of Central London in a large-scale theatrical spectacle. *The Sultan's Elephant* was a planned surprise for the people of London, turning the city into a playground for the day, with all rehearsals held out of the public eye and no advertising before the day. This was a successful first public event for Artichoke, reaping the Cultural Event of the Year award at the Visit London Awards in 2006.

As with all large productions that engage public space, safety protocols represent a significant part of the logistical strategies. In discussion with Helen Marriage, these are always approached with the goal of ‘safety out of sight’ (Marriage, 2021) to allow the audience to engage with the production to as much of a degree as they feel comfortable – to be secure yet interactive. The strategy for moving the elephant through the streets while inviting interaction with the public was to discreetly surround it with stewards in yellow shirts, adorned with a logo of the elephant and connected together by a thin rope, removing the use of hard barriers that would otherwise create visual and subconscious distance from the performance.



Figure 5. The Sultan's Elephant, Royal De Luxe, 2006. Produced by Artichoke in London. Photograph by Sophie Laslett.

In discussion with Helen Marriage, logistical public space challenges were extensive, not stopping at removing the centre island and a strip of traffic lights, in order to enable the mobile display to manoeuvre down the centre of Pall Mall and ensuring it would not tip over on the cambered edges of the street. The Licensing, Operations and Safety Planning Group (LOSPG), comprising 20-30 people from Royal Parks to police, fire and ambulance, was involved in meticulously discussing timetables and health and safety issues, assessing possible obstacles on the day. While nearly ten years of effort went into negotiating and working through logistics of public space interaction, not all circumstances could be foreseen. Responsive creative strategies were needed on the day of the epic display, as trees, trimmed to the height of double decker buses, obstructed the path of the moving elephant: astonishingly, actual chainsaws were

hoisted up to the artists atop the elephant, to trim the branches, adding drama to the arrival of the elephant at its final destination (Marriage, 2021).

“Nothing less than an artistic occupation of the city and a reclamation of the streets for the people”.

Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*, 6 May 2006

(cited in Artichoke, 2021 p. 3)

The closing of London’s streets to motor cars allowed people the freedom to experience the production, evoking entrancement and child-like wonder – offering the ability to “stroll the city, rather than have to dodge it” (Howard Jacobson, *The Independent*, 13 May 2006, cited in Webb, 2006, p. 7). In a piece entitled “Four days that shook the world”, Susannah Clapp, theatre critic for *The Observer*, describes the elephant as a marvel that invited the citizens of London to see the city in a fresh way, creating “a new map of the city; it made spirits soar” (Webb, 2006, p. 12). The surprise and wonder of *The Sultan’s Elephant* captured TV audiences on the day and newspapers around the world after. In 2006, in a world with social media in its infancy, knowledge of the elephant’s arrival was down to word on the street, or the very analogue method of texting photographs, or at most a post on Flickr, facilitating the element of surprise in the creative strategies pursued.

Reclaiming public space is not only about access to the physical space (the *urbs*/the concrete city) but also about engaging with the subconscious references to spaces in the city (the *civitas*/the soft city). In this sense, it could be argued that, through a project like *The Sultan’s Elephant*, which took place not long after the acts of terrorism of July 2005, that had attempted to claim this intangible aspect of ‘being’ in London, an emotive reconnection with London was experienced, as aptly described by a member of the audience:

‘Just to say thank you for a piece of totally awe-inspiring wonderfulness. Last time I was in Piccadilly with the traffic stopped it was for the Iraq demo. Last time I was in Trafalgar Square with the traffic stopped was for the 7/7 memorial vigil. Utterly joyous to see London come to a standstill for an elephant and a little girl and to see a smile on every face young and old, all faiths and cultures wrapped up in the magical silliness of the scale of it all and our beautiful city.’
(Comment from audience member, provided by Artichoke).

The Sultan’s Elephant established many of the strategies that have defined Artichoke’s approach since: an emphasis on collaboration and a desire for its ephemeral projects to have a long lasting impact on the life of the city, as is captured by countless requests for harnessing the momentum of the occasion for future interventions, such as in the email conversation documented in the legacy of the project: “Longer term we must work to ensure that the implications of the last few days are deep and far-reaching for the cultural landscape of this country.” (Quote from correspondence with Arts Council England, provided by Artichoke).

Also notable in this project, and subsequent ones, is the championing of an aesthetic of disruption, whereby Artichoke’s interventions aim to temporarily stop everyday

conventions of the city and radically re-imagine public spaces, triggering the excitement of the public. As an audience member explains,

‘It was the most wonderful, awe inspiring and magical event. My eight-year-old son has declared it the best weekend of his life! I am sure that there will be people around (probably not the ones who saw it) who will be questioning the vast amount of money spent on this and the huge disruption caused by it, but I hope that there will be enough people like myself telling you how totally worth it the experience was, that you will be able to consider staging more events like this.’
(Comment from audience member, provided by Artichoke).

This disruption is not limited to the routines and rhythms of the city: a level of disruption extends to the politics inherent to the management of large-scale public art events, and further, to an effect on policy, explained by Helen Marriage as she challenges the concept of the city as a mere machine for trade, toil and traffic, proposing rather that the events of the city play a role in the wellbeing and in the creative lives of its citizens (Marriage, 2021).

Case Study 2: Lumiere



Figure 6. Photograph of the Lumiere brochures, 2009, 2017 and 2019. Produced by Artichoke.

Lumiere is a light festival staging a biennial programme of artist-led light displays on a grand scale, making use of spaces and buildings as night-time sites. Celebrating the 10-year anniversary of productions in Durham between 2009-2019, it was also staged in Derry-Londonderry in 2013, and in London in 2016 and 2018. In 2021, this festival of light took place in Durham once more, despite having to navigate the complex restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Shows in Durham have fetched audiences of over 1 million visitors over six festivals, with over 10,000 people

participating in community learning and engagement programmes since 2009. Project costs were £9.5million with a PR value of £22.4million and an economic impact of £40million across the six festivals. *Lumiere* was winner of two awards: Best Arts and Cultural Programme and Best Collaboration for a Single Event, Corporate Engagement Awards 2020, for *Lift Off*, a learning programme that was part of *Lumiere* 2019. Contribution was made from over 100 sponsors, with seed money committed by Durham County Council. Marketwise was commissioned by Durham City Council to do an evaluation of the audience and the economic impact, while Audience Agency was appointed to do evaluations in London for *Lumiere* 2016 and 2018, as well as *Processions*.



Figure 7. A selection of images from Lumiere exhibitions. Produced by Artichoke in London. Courtesy of Artichoke.

“I cannot remember the last time I was in a British city so full of cheerful, excited people, and of every generation... The throng was charmed and amazed, and it kept saying so, sometimes in reverent whispers, and sometimes in joyful shout.”

Rachel Cooke, *The Observer*, 20 November 2011

(cited in Artichoke Brochure, 2021, p. 17).

One strand of the artist commissioning process for *Lumiere* has been implemented by BRILLIANT, who have supported 26 artists and commissioned 31 artworks over the many editions of the festival. This commissioning scheme invites anyone over the age of 18, in the UK, to submit a light-based artwork, from which six are selected to produce a fee-paid artwork, supported by the Artichoke production team, at the *Lumiere* festival. The scheme is particularly aimed at underrepresented groups. *Lumiere*, which has become increasingly embedded within the local community of Durham, implements a run-up programme of learning that engages schools. In 2015, the community participation programme reach was wide and multi-layered, involving 1385 participants in six installations. One such installation was titled *Litre of Light* and brought together artist Mick Stephenson, UK Festival producers, OASES, local education specialists, introducing and delivering the *Litre of Light* campaign and programme to 25 schools. The

campaign aimed to bring sustainable light sources to impoverished communities and involved collecting 12,000 recycled plastic bottles that were coloured by children, then assembled as part of an installation in Durham Cathedral's Cloisters, attracting thousands of visitors.

In Durham, the Apollo Pavilion was celebrated with colour-changing displays as a precursor to the *Lumiere* festival in April 2019. This standalone project was commissioned by DCC to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the building and of the Moon landing. A follow-up installation involved students from East Durham College for *Lumiere* 2019. These light installations aimed to adapt and disrupt the visual experience of spaces and buildings that have integral meaning to the city, but often fade into the backdrop of this, thereby bringing them to the foreground for re-appreciation and awareness. As one visitor mentioned, the exhibition was “a fantastic showcase of County Durham itself” (*Lumiere* 2019 visitors' comments, provided by Artichoke) or as another commented, it was “a really enjoyable evening with family and friends. A new way to appreciate beautiful Durham” (ibid.).

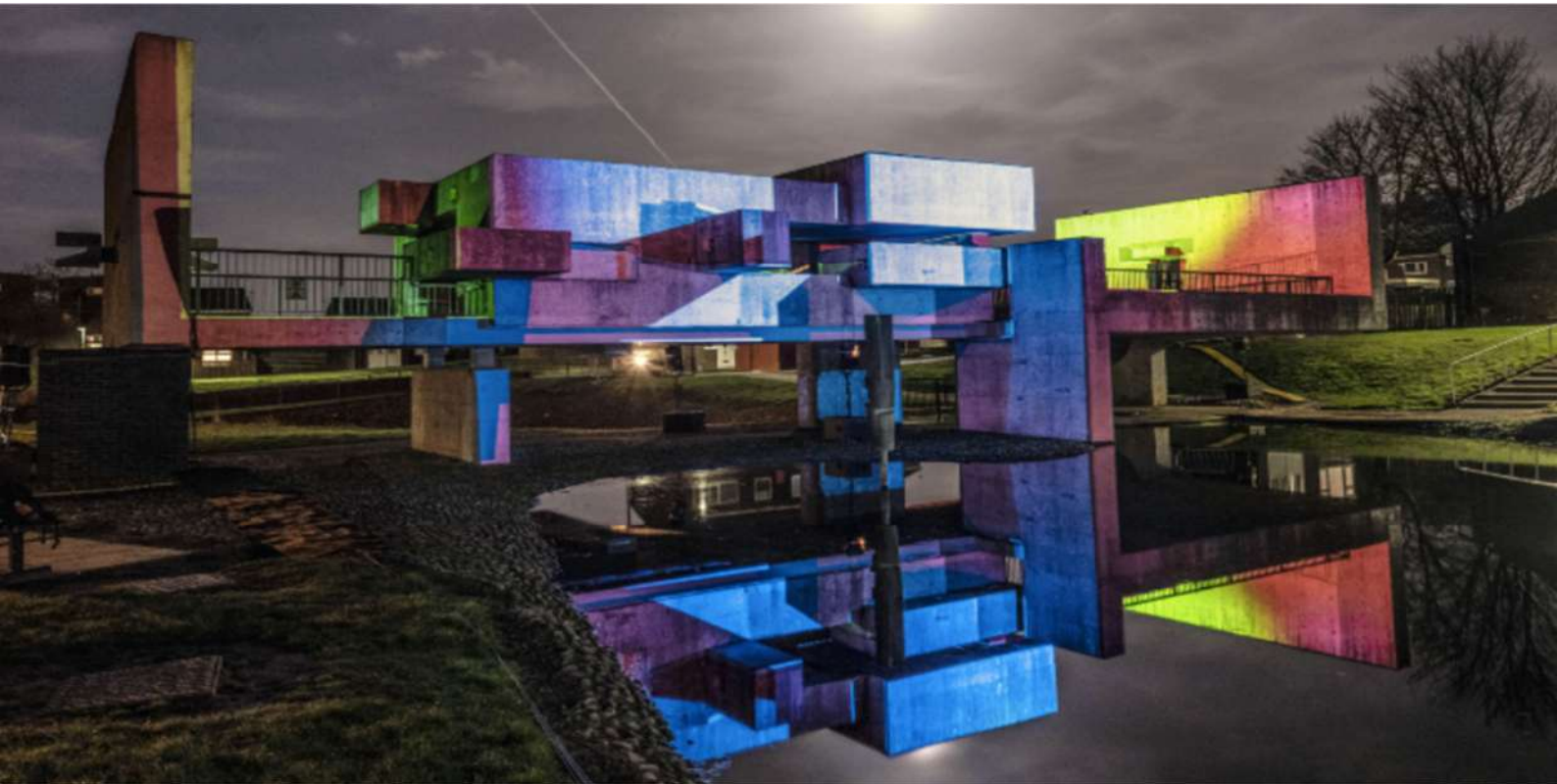


Figure 8. An image of the Apollo 50 light installation in Peterlee in County Durham, supported by the German Embassy. Image from the *Lumiere* 2019 brochure. Courtesy of Artichoke.

Lumiere is different from other Artichoke projects, as it is a recurring event, providing parameters for comparison and a platform for self-critique. Many audience members that commented on the 2019 event had visited in 2017 and were comparing the scale and effect of the installations. The 2019 exhibition was held in inclement weather, which

had a direct effect on the experience of the exhibition. As always with public art, the unpredictability of weather cannot be easily adapted to, and it is evident that in 2019, despite the festival's continued success, it had some negative effect on the experience of some audience members, who referred to the "mud pit" and hour-long queue created outside the Cathedral. This is of particular relevance in the context of climate change: while it would be unreasonable to expect public art events to be able to successfully cater to any weather condition, the increasing regularity of extreme weather patterns across the globe does raise food for thought in relation to the resilience of an artistic form that is inherently subject to the elements. On the other hand, we could argue that it is precisely in drawing our attention to the outdoors that such practice can foster a renewed sense of civic responsibility in relation to the environment surrounding us, be this a built one or a natural landscape. In this sense, the evident challenge in adapting to weather conditions, highlighted in the realisation of public art events like *Lumiere*, may indeed function as a wake-up call for all of us, in our collective awareness of the environmental crisis. Furthermore, it is also important to highlight that *Lumiere* and Artichoke have actively engaged with relevant organisations, such as Vision:2025 and A Greener Festival in developing environmental strategies to reduce carbon impact. In London, *Lumiere* has confirmed the city's global cultural reputation. The extent of the 2016 London show was enhanced in the recommissioned 2018 edition, which expanded to six central districts of the city. The strategies for safety were again led by the agenda 'secure-yet-invisible', fetching a security implementation cost of over £1 million. This non-intrusive safety protocol enhanced the interactive engagement of the audience, as it gained access to parts of the city often out of bounds.

"What was it that made Londoners leave their homes and tourists their hotels during the city's coldest four nights in years and, as many spontaneously did, lie face up on the freezing tarmac of Oxford Circus? Light is one answer. Art, another. For those four days the art scene in London was transformed"

John Nathan, *The Times*, 25 January 2016
(cited in Artichoke Brochure, 2021. p. 19).

Aesthetic disruption in *Lumiere* projects takes place through a sort of sensory reframing of the city, by using the dark night sky as a canvas and the light displays to heighten and focus the connection between the audience and the surrounding buildings. This 'city as gallery' method reclaims public spaces in the altered visual of the *urbs*, to reconnect and draw in the *civitas* through the spaces. Subconsciously, the same spaces will be compared and reviewed in the daylight, thus encouraging a lingering effect of the artistic interventions.

Case Study 3: Processions

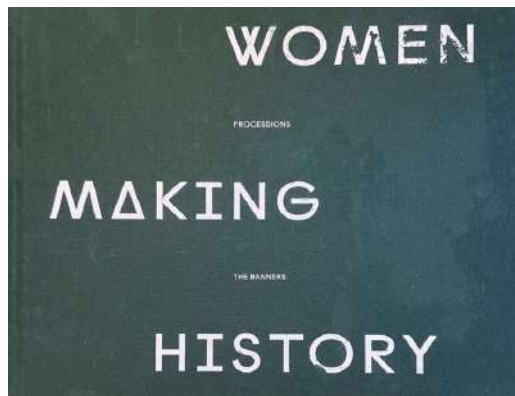


Figure 9. Photograph of Processions book. Courtesy of Artichoke.



Figure 10. Photograph: Cover image of report by 'The Audience Agency, June 2018. Courtesy of Artichoke.

Processions was a politically focussed production, commemorating one hundred years of women obtaining the right to vote in Britain. 14-18NOW commissioned Artichoke to produce this project, where 100 artists were nominated by community groups and 10 commissions were curated by Artichoke directly. Staged in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and London, the four capital cities in the UK, on the 10th of June 2018, *Processions* saw over 80,000 women and girls taking part in large scale marches across the cities, each of them wearing white, green or purple scarves on the day – the suffrage colours. The making of the project involved 1,600 participants across 100 organisations. *Processions* drew in a live audience of 67,000 people, combined with a further reach of 3.5million viewers for the BBC 1 live broadcast and over 10million Facebook advert impressions. The total project cost was £3.1million and extended to funding multiple components of engagement. Once more, the project entailed extensive safety requirements of directing thousands of people through the streets, increasing its administrative protocols to four unique cities with individual requirements. The disruption of traffic and pedestrianisation of parts of the city was the strategy to reclaim public spaces, in this way, treating the city itself as the project's living art gallery.

A core aspect of the project was the preparation of specially created banners to be used in the live marches. These were “original artworks inspired by the banners made by the suffragists and suffragettes who had campaigned for votes for women a century before” (*Women Making History*, 2020). The making of these banners as a form of connection prior to the event drew on the tradition of embroidery as a communal activity to forge bonds: this participatory process offered a space for discussion and for comparing experiences in the political undertones of the project. The banners were eclectic works, each one drawing on unique narratives: in some cases, participants used their grandmother's dresses as material, while others donated wool for the banners from their sheep in the Western Isles. The individuality of each banner was, hence, brought together in a combined message through the resulting “processions”. The achieved goal of unification through a single moment was the success of the event, celebrating the achievement of a much larger goal one century earlier. The banners

were then collated into a book and also displayed at London Scottish House in June 2021, as part of the exhibition *Women Making History*.

“At a time when feminism can sometimes feel splintered, it was poignant to see such dazzlingly broad range of groups moving in the same direction.”

Moya Crockett, *Stylist Magazine*, 2019

(cited in Artichoke Brochure, 2021, p. 23)

While physically, the live staging of *Processions* recalls a similar method to that of *The Sultan’s Elephant*, in that both entailed a parade-like performance across city centres, this level of participation reflects a developing ethos in Artichoke’s work, whereby the spectacular dimension of the projects is increasingly integrated with a level of co-creation with participants. Such co-creation is nonetheless always mitigated by the commissioned artists’ role in fostering a creative dialogue with the public. Indeed, Marriage also warns about possible dangers in the increasing tendency, within public art policies, to think of audience co-creation and participation as default strategies in this respect: it is important, she emphasises, to also validate the artist’s unique expertise and insight in the creation of innovative work (Marriage, 2021). Thus, the artist’s voice is always championed in Artichoke’s work, each project determining the ways in which public engagement is promoted as a result of this.

Compared to previous projects, in *Processions*, the role of social media was fundamental, eliminating the element of surprise, but rather inciting the support and following much like that of a civilian political protest. *Processions* was disseminated instantly through multiple platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and promoted by social media influencers, gathering momentum as the event continued. The website and E-shot also fetched thousands of visitors. The media campaign focussed on these platforms for recruitment activities, by increasing follower numbers before the event, as well as achieving amplification on the day and post-event awareness. There were over 56,800 online interactions about the project, which included high-profile mentions from International Women’s Day, BBC Woman’s Hour, the Cabinet Office and Turner Contemporary Margate, making online engagement key to the success of this event. *Processions*, therefore, used a combination of methods, encouraging different entry points of engagement through participatory making, time-coordinated marches simultaneously in the four cities involved, followed by the production of the book and the dedicated exhibition. The aesthetic of disruption was present once more, in the physical stopping of the everyday routines of the cities involved, caused by these large-scale marches, symbolically highlighting the urgency of the project’s message; in this sense, forging a deep and layered connection between participants as citizens and the city as political arena. As Jenny Waldman, the then director of I4-I8NOW, described:

“PROCESSIONS captured the zeitgeist. Dreamt up well before #MeToo, it gave women of all ages the opportunity to celebrate women’s achievements in the campaign for suffrage ... and to renew our determination to continue the campaign for women’s equality 100 years later”

(*Women Making History*, 2020. p.8).



Figure 11. Photograph of Processions in London. Photograph by Sheila Burnett. Courtesy of Artichoke.



Figure 12.. Photograph of Women Make History event in London, 2021. Courtesy of Artichoke.



Figure 13. Banner by artist Claudette Johnson. Contributors were service users from the East London Foundation Trust, Tower Hamlets, including words by poet and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou. Courtesy of Artichoke.

Conclusion

From this initial stage in our inquiry, it is possible to identify three areas of emerging findings:

- **ADAPTABILITY AND RESILIENCE**

Across the projects explored in this article, we have seen some key traits in the strategies employed, aimed at making Artichoke's work both feasible and impactful. It is clear that meticulous planning and robust structures in place for eventualities are necessitated by the mass scale of the projects in question. Each case study has taken several years in the development of logistics, through large teams of dedicated staff involved and, crucially, through continuous dialogue with local authorities and governmental structures. One of the characteristics of Artichoke's work is the company's dynamic position as both creative producer and commissioner of work. Artichoke actively mediates the relationship between the artists and the public entities involved in each project. Its position is dynamic because it is never quite the same: across *The Sultan's Elephant*, *Lumiere* and *Processions*, there are different mechanisms in which Artichoke has selected artists, has been involved in the creative process and has liaised with public organisations in relation to the work. The fluidity of this approach is reflected in Artichoke's broad mission statement, as indicated in its documentation material: there is no "standard" Artichoke project (even in the case of regular programmes such as *Lumiere*, each edition takes on a different form), other than the common traits of ephemerality, public space and ambitious scale. Indeed, it is indicative that the projects in question have all become household names in their own right, perhaps even more so than Artichoke itself. Within the company, Artichoke provides expertise on both the institutional front and the artistic one, facilitating a dialogue that is often notoriously problematic in public art, where challenges may arise from the different styles of communication and contrasting priorities between institutions, creatives and the general public (Cartiere and Willis, 2008; Lanzl, 2020). Another manifestation of Artichoke's adaptability is in its use of "safety-made-invisible" measures, almost as an antidote to the 'security theatre' principle, to use the phrase coined by Bruce Schneier (2003, 2009) in highlighting the questionable tendency to make security strategies be outwardly performed for the public, so as to reassure its feeling of safety, whether effective or not. Here, instead, not only are many such measures deliberately not made overt, but through creative strategies they are aesthetically disguised, made part of the "show". This, in turn, disrupts the barrier between audience and artwork, inviting the public to experience a sense of ownership with the work, rather than a physical and/or psychological separation from this. How much these tactics will be feasible in the aftermath of Covid remains to be seen: it is clear, though, that the company will continue to foster this principle, tailoring this to new logistical challenges. The fact that, whilst not pandemic related, the projects explored here all had to deal with global threats to public spaces both preceding and concurrent with the projects (e.g. *The Sultan's Elephant* happening within less than twelve months after the 7/7 attacks in London or indeed *Lumiere 2021* taking place in the midst of Covid restrictions) indicates that there is a clear track record in this respect.

- **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: BALANCING OF PARTICIPATION WITH ARTIST-LED EXPERTISE**

Whilst many of the projects produced by Artichoke involve participatory elements (*Processions* is a key example of this), a core principle in Artichoke's ethos is the foregrounding of the artist's expertise in creating engaging and ground-breaking experiences. As we have seen, Marriage passionately advocates the importance of the professional artist's experience and vision, and warns about the risk of inadvertently invalidating these through a tendency, increasingly seen within public funding policies, to emphasise co-creation with and delegation of the public as a means to develop new work. This is a contentious issue in public art and one that has been at the centre of numerous debates in this field. Skelly and Edensor (Courage, 2020, p. 259) provide an overview of how the process of 'festivalisation', a phrase cited from Häussermann and Siebel (1993) that we can link here to the work of Artichoke in its creation of spectacular mass experiences, on the one hand, has been regarded as an evident source of economic boost that highlights its investment potential, both cultural and commercial; on the other hand, it has also been critically interrogated as endorsing a market-driven approach that may risk making the public into passive consumers, thus reprising Guy Debord's famous critique of the 'Society of the Spectacle' (1987). Within this debate, many perspectives in public art and placemaking have identified the need for a bottom-up approach to reclaiming public space, reprising a social turn in contemporary art (Kortbek, 2019) precisely to combat the decline in public spaces through commercialisation and privatisation (Bodnar, 2015, p. 2095). Hence, co-creation with the public, as opposed to an artist-driven authorship, has often been identified as a necessity, to ensure that public art can function as a genuine representation of a community, as opposed to being institutionally and/or commercially imposed upon the latter. Yet, critics like Claire Bishop have also pointed out the flaws of this argument, claiming that "such a denigration of authorship allows simplistic oppositions to remain in place: active versus passive viewer, egotistical versus collaborative artist, privileged versus needy community, aesthetic complexity versus simple expression, cold autonomy versus convivial community." (Bishop, 2012, p. 25). It is important to emphasise that all of our case studies in Artichoke's work were admission-free for the public (where ticketing systems were needed, to manage large audiences at peak hours, these were still free of charge). In this sense, Artichoke's projects should be distinguished from other forms of mass-scale entertainment events whereby commercial factors are key determinants in the success of the work and, more importantly, in whether this is actually accessible and affordable for the general public. Public participation, as identified by Mencarelli and Puhl (2006), can take form in different ways and, in this sense, Artichoke's work can be seen as a stimulus to encourage a more nuanced approach in policy-making, where the relation between artists and public can be seen in its full complexity, so that one does not work at the expense of the other, but, project by project, new possibilities for interaction are accordingly explored and celebrated.

- **ART OF DISRUPTION**

Throughout this discussion, we have used the terms *adapting* and *disrupting* to convey the specific ways in which Artichoke creatively positions itself in relation to urbanist and artistic practices. As it continually evolves and reinvents itself, 'adapting' from project to

project and from location to location, Artichoke's practice has the objective of actively breaking, 'disrupting', the routines of the city and to question the role that the city plays in the life of its citizens. According to Schipper (2014, pp. 18-26), a city should be seen as a process, as opposed to a static, material entity. This in many ways reprises Artichoke's ethos as it conveys a notion that an urban environment, far from being reducible to a mere machine, is a platform for human engagement and growth: a cross-pollination of ideas and experiences to stimulate thinking beyond boundaries and timeframes. Artichoke establishes new ways of experiencing the public sphere, precisely through its 'creative mis-use' of given spaces: streets are temporarily blocked, daily routines are paused and everyday spaces are aesthetically subverted - through changing sets, through light, through giant marionettes, through people. Its approach is geared towards the 'soft city', as it explores the intangible ways in which we encounter an urban space, allowing multiple personalised subjective experiences, as is documented in the numerous audience responses that we have been able to read from across our case studies. Whilst the vast majority of these testifies the transformative impact of Artichoke's work, some responses are also critical: circumstantial factors such as bad weather and logistical hiccups can negatively affect the experience of the spectators, as conveyed in some comments. It is also understandable that the disruption of the city will provoke the disapproval of some residents and commuters, precisely as the projects, and especially the earlier ones like *The Sultan's Elephant*, largely preceding the ubiquity of social media instant dissemination, are based upon surprising a non-expectant public. An element of risk is thus inevitable in the ephemeral nature of Artichoke's projects and indeed a feature in their aesthetic vision; but it is also in this ephemerality that we can find a key strategy in initiating a performative and transformative encounter with the public, who is invited to reacquaint itself with the city, temporarily reimagining its collective function and potential in relation to this. It is through the soft city that Artichoke's work can be seen as a game changer in the Cultural Ecosystem Services (CES), defined as the "nonmaterial benefits people obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, and aesthetic experiences" (Duconseillea and Saner, 2020). As we navigate the unknown factors that will continue to shape our experience of the public sphere in the aftermath of the pandemic and in the midst of new global challenges, it is likely that this soft city focus will continue to represent an essential strategy for Artichoke, whose methods may indeed provide a useful stimulus for other cultural producers and for the policies that can enable their work. And, as the phrase 'safety in numbers' will continue to entail contradictory connotations in this panorama, it is precisely in these methods that new opportunities and new visions may be found, highlighting the role of large scale public art gatherings as a vital vehicle in engaging with our cities.

Further notes

We see this research as a starting phase in what we hope will be an ongoing effort in reflecting upon Artichoke's current and forthcoming work. In establishing a framework to evaluate the strategies in place as utilised by Artichoke, our intention is to build on these considerations and continue to use these to document a landscape that, now more than ever, is ever-changing and unpredictable.

References

- Artichoke (2020) *Women Making History*. London: Profile Editions.
- Artichoke (2021) Artichoke Brochure [online]. Available at: <https://issuu.com/artichoketrustuk/docs/at20-corp-issuu-v4-high> (Accessed: 01/12/2021).
- Bishop, C. (2012) *Artificial Hells: participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*. London: Verso.
- Bodnar, J. (2015) 'Reclaiming public space'. *Urban Studies* 52(12), p. 2090-2104. [online]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26146122> (Accessed: 06/06/2021).
- Cartiere, C. and Willis, S. (eds.) (2008) *The practice of public art*. [online] Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9780203926673> (Accessed: 14/01/2020).
- Courage, C. et al (eds.) (2020) *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking*. London: Routledge.
- Debord, G. and Knabb, K. (2005) *The society of the spectacle*. London: Rebel Press.
- Duconseille, F. and Saner, R. (2020) 'Creative Placemaking for Inclusive Urban Landscapes'. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 50(3), p.137–154 [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2020.175498> (Accessed: 06/06/2021).
- Hewitt, A. and Jordan, M. (2015) 'Politicising publics'. In: C. Cartiere and M. Zebracki, (eds.) *The Everyday Practice of Public Art*. [online] Routledge, pp.27–45. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315737881> (Accessed: 20/06/2021).
- Kortbek, H.B. (2018) 'Contradictions in Participatory Public Art: Placemaking as an Instrument of Urban Cultural Policy'. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 49(1), p.30–44.
- Lanzl, C. (2020) 'Toward a New Paradigm: Public Art and Placemaking in the Twenty-First Century'. In: Christine Henseler, C. (ed.) *Extraordinary Partnerships: How the Arts and Humanities Are Transforming America*. [online] Lever Press. p.51-72. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11649046.7> (Accessed 20/06/21).
- Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The production of space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Marriage, H. (2021) 'Safety in Numbers'. Interview by Kirsten Jeske Thompson [Zoom], 12 February 2021 and 20 September 2021.
- Mencarelli, R. and Pulh, M. (2006). 'Positioning the Supply of Live Performance: Innovative Managerial Practices Relating to the Interaction of Spectator, Performance and Venue'. *International Journal of Arts Management* [online] 8(3), p.19–29. [online] Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41064884> (Accessed: 14 Dec. 2021).
- Psarra, S. (2009) *Architecture and Narrative: The Formation of Space and Cultural Meaning*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Raban, J. (1998) *Soft City*. London: The Harvill Press.
- Schipper, I. (2014) 'City as Performance'. *TDR (1988-)* 58(3), pp.18–26 [online]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24584813> [Accessed 14 Dec. 2021].
- Schneier, B. (2003) *Beyond fear: thinking sensibly about security in an uncertain world*. New York: Copernicus Books.
- Schneier, B. (2009) *Beyond Security Theater*. [online] Available at: https://www.schneier.com/essays/archives/2009/11/beyond_security_thea.html. [Accessed 14 Dec. 2021].
- Webb, N. (ed.) (2006) *Four Magical Days in May: How an Elephant Captured the Heart of a City*. London: Artichoke Trust.



Figure 14. With-Against, by Tim Etchells at Seaham Marina. Lumiere, 2021. Produced by Artichoke, United Kingdom. Photo by Matthew Andrews.

Creating a Network of Places through Participatory Actions across Cities and Cultures

Leandro Madrazo

La Salle - Ramon Llull University, School of Architecture, Spain | leandro.madrazo@salle.url.edu

Tadeja Zupančič

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Architecture, Slovenia | tadeja.zupancic@fa.uni-lj.si

Burak Pak

KU Leuven, Belgium | burak.pak@kuleuven.be

Maria Irene Aparício

Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Departamento de Ciências da Comunicação (DCC), Portugal
maparicio@fcs.unl.pt

Abstract

The aim of the A-Place project is to address the problem of placelessness in our multicultural, and interconnected societies from a multidisciplinary and participatory perspective. Artists and creators, educators and students of art and architecture, and cultural agents collaborate with communities in the design and implementation of placemaking activities with the purpose of reinforcing the bonds between people and the places they live in. Activities in locations in several European cities, as well as in digital spaces, have contributed to the creation of a network of places –both tangible and intangible – that exploit the multiple dimensions of public space as a stage for leisure, entertainment and education. A sequence of planning, performing, reflecting and evaluating has been applied to the activities carried out in the first year of this four-year project. The outcomes of this first cycle will help to expand the network of places in the coming years of the project. A key issue for the further development of the project is the evaluation of the impact of placemaking activities on the communities.

Keywords: placemaking, public space, situated learning, practice-based research, place

To cite this article:

Madrazo, L., Zupančič, T., Pak, B. and Aparício, M. I. (2022) "Creating a Network of Places with Participatory Actions across Cities and Cultures", *The Journal of Public Space*, 7(3). pp. 25-44. doi: 10.32891/jps.v7i3.1453

This article has been double blind peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

I. Introduction

A-Place – “Linking places through networked artistic practices”¹ – is a project co-funded by the Creative Europe programme (2019-2023), whose aim is to address the problem of placelessness in our multicultural, and interconnected societies. It does so by designing and implementing activities in public space involving residents as well as artists, educators and cultural agents. These activities, carried out in six European cities (Barcelona, Bologna, Brussels, Lisbon, Ljubljana, and Nicosia) connect the meanings and experiences associated to places across cultural and geographic boundaries (Figure 1). Partners are community-based organizations, cultural agencies and higher education institutions (art, architecture and planning, social sciences).

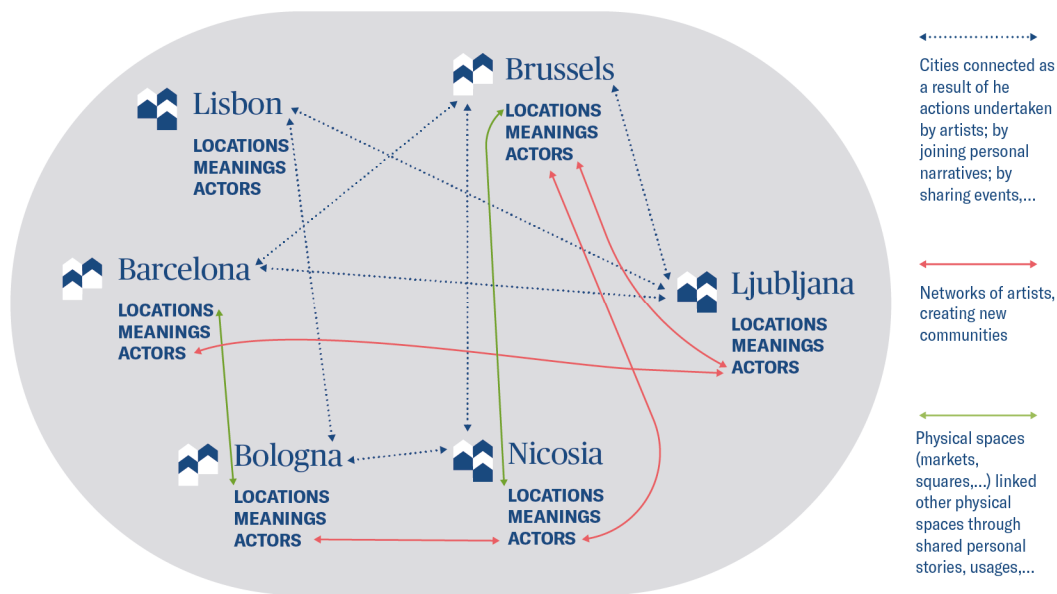


Figure 1. Creating a network of places.

The objectives of the project are:

- To develop and apply community-based, interdisciplinary practices to reveal the manifold meanings that the various individuals and social groups give to the places they share and to create meaningful connections between places in different cities and cultures.
- To create cross-disciplinary learning spaces arising from the confluence of artistic practices with educational programmes at various levels, from school to higher education. These spaces, intertwined with placemaking activities, will overcome the boundaries between academia and society, and between disciplines.
- To explore the role and exploit the potential of networked artistic practices in the process of creating places, in physical and digital spaces, by embedding them in the community and engaging other stakeholders in the co-creation process (residents, students, educational staff).

¹ <https://www.a-place.eu/>

- To exploit the capacities of digital technologies in the creation of new links between representations of places (videos, photographs, stories) disseminated through digital networks, and framing activities in digital space in sociocultural contexts where they can be meaningfully used in creative placemaking activities.

The creative spatial practices implemented by the network aim to create meaningful places in order to foment more inclusive and supportive communities. Ultimately, the aim of A-Place is to contribute to the humanization of places at risk in cities that are undergoing transformation processes, resulting from the contemporary movements of migration, acculturation to local life, street art and political activism, sustainability and other current urban trends.

1.1 Public spaces and places

Typically, with the term public space we refer to spaces that belong to the community, rather to a person or group; spaces which are open and accessible to everyone, any time, in both physical and the political sense. In the physical sense, public spaces are urban and natural areas; highways and train stations; squares, streets and promenades; playgrounds and shopping malls, and digital infrastructures. A space is public because it belongs to the “public”. However, the public realm is regulated by laws and policies issued by political representatives. Public spaces can also be a site of negotiation and conflict, where individuals and groups come together to discuss and debate issues of common concern. It is the manifestation of the “public sphere” (Habermas, 1984), a discursive space in which people –regardless of their origins or class– exercise their capacity for communicative action.

Through the activities performed in public spaces –walking or driving a vehicle; meeting with friends and neighbours; playing with children; participating in a demonstration, a party or a marathon– people forge links with spaces, that is, they create places from open spaces with “no fixed pattern of established human meaning” like “a blank sheet on which meaning may be imposed” (Tuan, 1977, p. 54). This place creation involves a process of personal perception through all the senses (sights, smells and sounds), as well the activation of our imagination and our memories of the spaces we inhabit. Place is not only an individual creation but a social and cultural construct that is shaped by the interactions and experiences of individuals and groups. Places are “a manifestation of human culture” (Ujang and Zakariya, 2015), a reflection of the values, beliefs and practices of the people who inhabited them.

Place and identity are strongly interrelated; place and place attachment are inextricably connected. “When space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place”, contended Tuan (1977, p. 73). We belong to places and places belong to us; we make places our own and develop a sense of belonging to them. The sense of place is inherent to the human being, since being –in the Heideggerian sense of Dasein– entails creating links with the spaces we inhabit in order to make them the places of our existence. As Relph (1976, p. 38) argued, “To have roots in a place is to have a secure point from which to look out on the world, a firm grasp of one’s own position in the order of things, and a significant spiritual and psychological attachment to somewhere in particular”. However, in a globalised world subject to continuous flows of individuals (workers, tourists) and groups (massive migration waves), undergoing a continuous mix of cultures and values, a “local place” has become a “closed, coherent, integrated as authentic, as ‘home’” (Massey, 2005, p. 6), that is, a place where we retreat to protect

ourselves against the invasions of “the others”. To counteract this “exclusivist claims to places” what is needed is a notion of space “constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales” (Massey, 1994, p.4).

1.2 Public space as network

The idea of public space as a network of relations in a continuous process of becoming, helps to overcome the dualism between material and social structures which has been seen as a limitation by sociologists as well as by architects and planners.

From the perspective of sociology, spaces are not given, but are constructed and deconstructed, and in the course of this process, their constitutive elements are linked in multiple ways. Reflecting upon the need to imagine notions of space which respond to the conditions of our globalised societies in order to articulate spatial politics accordingly, Massey contends that space is “a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made” (Massey, 2005, p. 9). In a similar vein, Löw (2016) argues that space is not just an empty container, but “a relational arrangement of living beings and social goods” that facilitates certain actions and practices while being actively shaped by them.

The need to think of space in relational terms is also postulated in the field of architecture and planning. Tonkiss argued that overcoming the boundaries established by the social sciences and design disciplines is a prerequisite to think about urban form in a multi-dimensional way, as something “composed of material structures and physical spaces, but also and perhaps more fundamentally by social, economic, legal and political modes of organization and interaction” (Tonkiss, 2013, p. 2).

1.3 Public space as communication space

The network of interrelated elements that make up a space also includes the messages that are transmitted through it. Public space is essentially a space for communication. Public and publicity are strongly interlinked: what happens in public space is known by all, that is, it is publicized. Any element –a piece of public furniture or a large infrastructure; an artwork or a building– or an event –a festival, a demonstration– placed in public space becomes a sign which conveys a message. The capacity of public space to convey messages has been exploited in cities throughout history. As Çelik, Favro and Ingersoll (1994, p. 4) contend: “The naming, sitting and form of the streets, and the iconography of the buildings and street furniture that help shape them are a means of communicating ideological messages to the public domain”. This is true for both ancient and contemporary cities. Today, newly installed benches in a neighbourhood transmit the message that the local government is taking care of public equipment, while dirty streets suggest that there are not enough services and/or little care of the residents; the abundance of graffiti can be an expression of rejection by certain social groups against social and power structures, but public art in murals tell us about the will of the community to reinvigorate dull and lost spaces.

The communicative capacity of public space has grown exponentially through the use of digital media. Messages are emitted, and re-emitted in public space and spread through digital media. A passer-by taking a photograph of the new benches or the dirty streets amplifies the message beyond the social and physical limits of the neighbourhood; and a well-driven social media campaign about a local event in a community can attract the

attention of people from any distant location. In this way, digital technologies become instruments of contemporary practices of spatial production. Referring to Lefebvre's production of space, Zamani, McMeel and Manfredini (2014) pointed out that "digital and communicative social networks within digital realms produce their own social spaces which are entwined with the urban social spaces". Therefore, the production of space is no longer constrained to location, rather it expands through the digital networks interlinking images, sounds and words, opinions and values from the most diverse places.

1.4 Public space as space for artistic creation

Artists have exploited the communicative potential of public space to expose and disseminate their works, outside the institutionalized circles of galleries, museums and concert halls. Art works displayed or performed on the streets transcend the realm of individual expression to become a vehicle for social and political critique, giving visibility to the artist's ideas and talent as well as expressing the concerns of a community. However, although in its beginnings, street art was the expression of a revolutionary aesthetic against established practices, over time "it has become co-opted, artistically annexed, through acting as a (literal and metaphorical) facade, a mere marketing tool for the Creative City brand" which is "selling a false notion of place" (Schacter, 2014, p. 162). Nowadays, street art is not only used by artists to convey ideological messages, but it has been endorsed by private initiatives, such as organizing street art tours as part of the branding strategy (Andron, 2018), and by public administrations which turn to artists to transform dull walls into colourful murals as part of their urban renewal programmes (Landry et al, 1996).

1.5 Place and placemaking

The term "placemaking" has been used since the 1990s by the non-profit organization Project for Public Spaces (PPS). They define placemaking as "an overarching idea and a hands-on approach for improving a neighbourhood, city, or region, placemaking inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community" (Project for Public Spaces, 2007). Other authors have proposed definitions of placemaking which put the focus on the objectives of placemaking. According to De Brito and Richards (2017), "Placemaking can be basically summarised as the art of making better places for people", although what makes a place "better", why and how to make it better, lies at the core of the matter. The purpose of placemaking is to create places "that benefit everyone – places that connect existing residents, instead of dividing, alienating, or displacing them, and places that enhance the existing character of a neighbourhood, instead of erasing it", asserts Kahne (2015). For Wyckoff (2014) the goal of placemaking is "to improve the quality of various places in a neighbourhood, and by extension, the community and region in which those places are located as well." In sum, what drives placemaking is a desire to improve and enhance the built environment and to make it more liveable through the participation of people, "in both the production of meaning and in the means of production of a locale", a "contested process in which citizenship plays a key, mediating role" (Lepofsky and Fraser, 2003, p. 128). Placemaking involves creating temporary, community-driven interventions to activate spaces through events. In this regard, it aligns with the principles of tactical urbanism: affordability and ease-of-set-up ("lighter, quicker, cheaper") enabling agile responses;

performing as experimental micro urban labs for testing alternative scenarios to overcome the traditional division between plan making and plan implementation, in the spirit of the “experimental city” (Silva, 2016); ensuring community relevance and enabling support for a set of interventions leading to adaptive and responsive solutions to community concerns (Treskon et al, 2018); and providing incremental build-up towards future longer-term and permanent projects playing a strategic role in urban development (Lydon and Garcia, 2015).

The experimental nature of temporary placemaking offers multiple opportunities to integrate art and artistic performance (Evans, Karvonen and Raven, 2016) and explore “place-as-it-can be” which helps connect people to places and get them involved in the reimagining of the future of the places they are engaged in. Edensor (2015) focuses on the potentials of “sensual discovery” and elaborates on how senses can open up the city to multiple interpretations. Placemaking with senses in mind, integrating sounds, smells, tastes and tactile interactions facilitate the creative challenging of the established ways of acting and thinking for and with the people (Franck and Stevens, 2015).

Integrating artistic performances in placemaking also opens up the potential of performative modes in urban development. Performativity in this context is twofold: first, artists create their own “performance space” (Treskon et al, 2018), and second, this space has a performative capacity beyond the artistic intervention, as a community embedded relational placemaking (Parolek, 2014). In this sense, placemaking integrating artistic performances can be understood as a mode of performative urbanism: placemaking as the art of articulating “other spaces” activating the performative character of places by creating situations in which a new reality is created (Wolfrum and Brandis, 2015).

1.6 Creating networks of places

The creation of places as nodes in a network of relations in continuous construction transcends the notion of public space as a fixed and delimit urban form. In its dynamics, this network generates links between locations and actors, material elements and symbolic meanings, public realm and personal experiences. Through the use of digital media, this dynamic construction overcomes the geographic limits of public spaces, transcending both locality and culture.

The process of creating networked places involves the participation of a diverse group of actors, including professionals from multiple disciplines and the inhabitants of the area. In today’s socially diverse, fragmented and fluid societies, identifying and addressing the shared needs –both functional and symbolic– of different groups can be challenging for planners when proposing new public spaces or transforming existing ones. To overcome this challenge, it is essential to involve individuals and various social and ethnic groups in the planning process in order to gain a deeper understanding of the places and the needs of the community, which can inform decision making.

Currently, a variety of practices such as placemaking, creative placemaking, tactical urbanism, pop-up urbanism, performative urbanism and community art-based interventions all share a common goal of engaging and learning from community members, strengthening connections between people and the spaces they live in order to foster a sense of belonging. These approaches to public space and planning open up opportunities for collaboration between professionals, such as artists, planners, and sociologists, and non-professionals to engage in creative practices that are deeply

rooted in the social and built environments. Through this collaboration, the community's knowledge and perspectives can be integrated into the design process, resulting in public spaces that are more responsive to the needs and desires of the community.

2. Methodology: placemaking as practice-based research

Research on placemaking is integrated into the humanities and social sciences. While natural sciences and technical sciences need hypothesis, which might be supported by research questions, humanities and social sciences are based on questions and aims. Thus, research aims or themes play the role of research questions in the scientific field. Instead of applying a general theory and methodological framework to the case studies, we focus on theme-related knowledge which can be explained step-by-step from the case studies, rather than from any methodological generalisation. In this kind of social-based research, methods remain case-dependent. This bottom-up research approach has received a variety of names: 'practice-based' research, 'practice-led' research, 'research by design' and 'practice-driven' research.

Placemaking can be seen as a 'practice-based research' (Vienna Declaration, 2014) which reveals a research problem and a bank of research evidence; such as a 'practice-led' research (Zupančič, 2020); 'research by design' conducted by experimentation and live-research laboratories (Verbeke, 2013; Tamke, Nicholas and Ramsgaard Thomsen, 2017) or hybrid 'practice-driven' (Zupančič, 2021) research which responds to unpredictable circumstances although it is nevertheless guided by research aims.

Placemaking is about transforming spaces into places by changing their aesthetic, physical and social characteristics (Kelkar and Spinelli, 2016). Therefore, a key issue is to assess to which extent these goals are achieved. The evaluation encompasses includes assessing the relevance of the themes addressed and the impact on places and their communities. In order to assess this relevance, we need to answer questions such as: "Which values (collective creativity, social engagement, community building) have the activities helped to reveal?" and "Have the activities brought about changes in the community and in the social groups involved?". The evaluation needs to be specifically "designed" for each placemaking activity, taking into account the expectations and shared goals of the various actors involved (e.g. artists, planners, citizens).

The transformation of spaces into places is a gradual and slow process that involves developing civic and cultural habits and a sense of identity with regard to these spaces. The first step is precisely to understand how people perceive these spaces: what they see (or do not see); what they hear and how they hear it. Learning to perceive a space and to share that perception is a way to begin the transformation process. Jason Miller (2021, p. 122) advocates the importance of a [Hegelian] "aesthetic reflexivity" that summons subjectivity through the perception of art, as part of the "cultural turn" that reasserts art's socio-political meaning. In this context, the perception of spaces through art, which suggests "Where to look?", shapes a cultural policy and highlights "a way of understanding art as something that orients us within our social environment. Miller argues that art is a form of "aesthetic narrative" that has a stronger ability to communicate with a diverse audience than traditional discourses: "This is because the work of art appears to us as a sensible object also invested with human thought, emotion, perspective, insight, meaning, etc.- i.e., with Idea. [...] the Idea may appear in a

work of art, its appearance is necessarily manifested in sensuous material: the bronzen form; the painted image; the word; the notes; the photograph; the film; the performance; and so on” (Miller 2021, pp. 116-117). This reflexive characteristic of art, which relates to a phenomenology of aesthetic experience, can be the basis for a change in attitudes and mentalities towards the transformation of spaces over time.

2.1 Iterative cycles of planning, performing and reflecting

In A-Place, we are applying an action research approach which is based on cycles that Zuber-Skerritt (2001, p. 19) summarized as follows: “(1) strategic planning, (2) implementing the plan (action), (3) observation, evaluation and self-evaluation, (4) critical and self-critical reflection on the results of (1) - (3), and making decisions for the next cycle of action research”. The planning-performing-reflecting-and-evaluating cycles are carried out throughout the four years of the project’s lifetime (Figure 2).

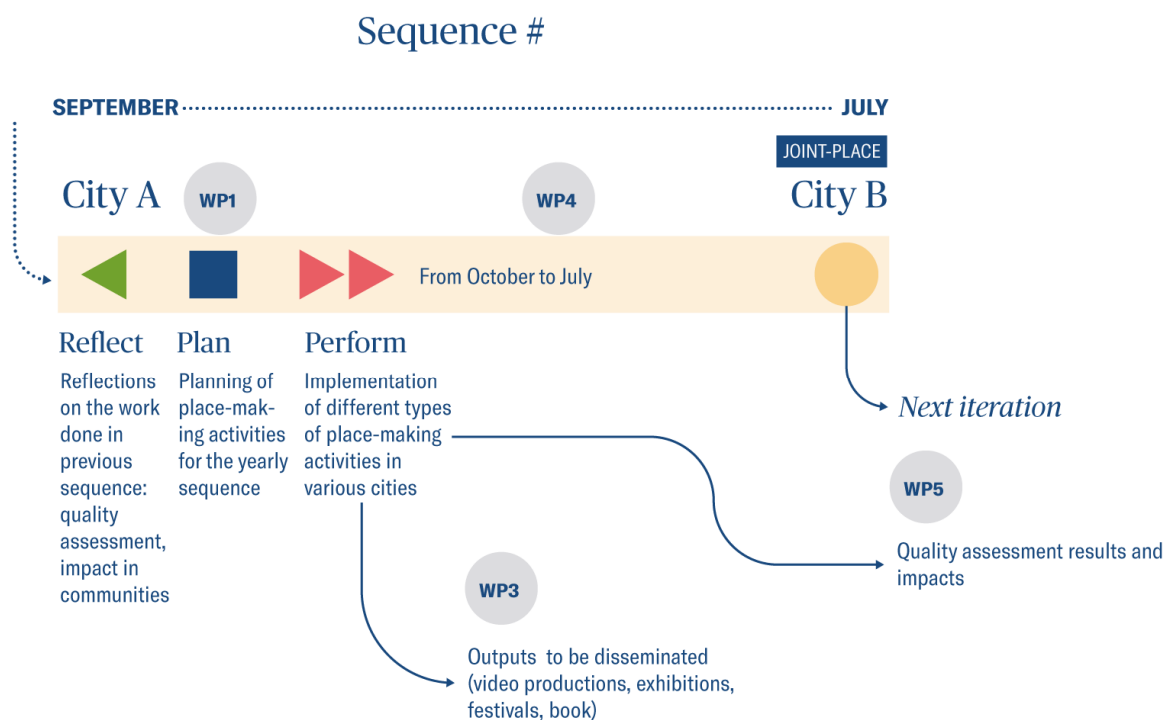


Figure 2. Iterative cycles of the A-Place project

Placemaking and creative actions are *planned* in diverse locations, utilizing the resources that are available, such as contacts with communities and existing institutional programmes, through a bottom-up and iterative process. The initial selection of cases is pragmatic and based on the project partners’ capacities and previous experience. A more specific design of the activities is then developed based on the issues that are relevant for the local communities. Most activities are problem-oriented fieldwork case studies. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have had to adapt and develop activities on a global scale using digital technologies.

After the placemaking activities have been *performed*, a *reflection* process is undertaken to identify common topics and shared strategies. This reflection is crucial in the overall

process of creating a network of places and establishing a global sense of place. It involves creating a shared glossary and to identify themes of debate derived from the work done by partners in the various cities and locations. The glossary and themes are made public on the “Netplaces” section of the project website to facilitate further collaboration and knowledge sharing among project partners and stakeholders (Figure 3).

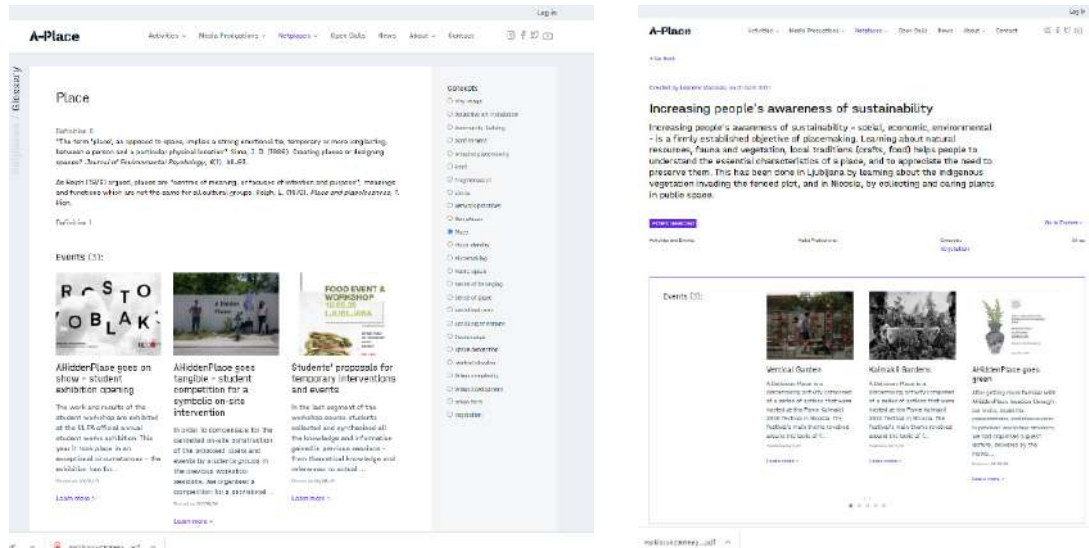


Figure 3. Vocabulary and themes in A-Place website

Each cycle ends with an *evaluation* of the process and outputs. This conveys adopting a position outside the self-reflective process (Schön, 1983), for then initiating the next iteration taking into account the findings of the evaluation. Non-linearity, shifting argumentation and unexpected coherences are essential in this iterative process. At the outset, it is more about weaving the individual experiences into a web of relations than creating a methodology.

A-Place is a project that aims to combat indifference and socio-cultural exclusion through the qualitative transformation of public spaces into places. However, addressing the problem of placelessness requires actions that go beyond singular events and even beyond the lifetime of the project. Socio-cultural transformations that involve changes in habits and behaviours towards humanizing public spaces and fostering neighbourhood relations are slow processes. The transformation of spaces at various levels such as physical, socio-cultural, and affective, which is the objective of most of the project's activities, also requires changes in the mentality of the actors involved, which can only be revealed through the continuity of the cultural and artistic activities over time. Furthermore, assessing the deep and long-term impact of these changes requires specific methodologies that go beyond the spatiotemporal limits of a specific placemaking activity.

3. A comprehensive programme of placemaking activities

A broad programme of placemaking activities (Madrazo, 2020) was planned at the start of the first year of the project, and launched in February 2020. However, the COVID-

19 pandemic struck right at the start of the implementation of the planned activities. For a project focused on activating social and physical spaces through placemaking interventions, the restrictions imposed by the lockdown presented a significant challenge. Despite these limitations, and also thanks to them, we adapted our plans to examine the concept of community and its relationship to place, in the context of confinement. In this regard, the pandemic ultimately provided opportunities for new perspectives and insights.

3.1 “A Calm Place”, by Alive Architecture and KU Leuven

The Schaerbeek district in Brussels has a long migration history. Communities from multiple origins and ethnicities live in the same area. Additionally, the district is home to several higher education institutions. The Campus 1030 project was launched with the goal of strengthening ties between residents and students.

To contribute to the objectives of this project, we designed a series of interventions around the Place de la Reine, where the Maison des Arts is located². Students from an elective master course at KU Leuven made a sensorial urban walk to familiarize themselves with the area. They left traces of their impressions in bowls which were left floating on a pond in the square. The floating bowls produced a meditative sound that created the peaceful atmosphere of a calm place.

In a second walk, students marked the area with signs to propose paths for residents to move through public space. Participants were able to develop their spatial awareness, paying attention to sound, smells and the materials they touched (Figure 4). They then left written testimony of their impressions on the green (Figure 5). As a closing event, a dinner and a concert by the Turkish Tatyos ensemble for students and residents was organized in the square. This ephemeral placemaking intervention helped to create an emerging community of students and faculty members, artists and activists, through a participatory process which enabled them to discover a place.



Figure 4. Sensorial walk touching different materials.



Figure 5. Leaving a trace of the feelings after the sensorial walk.

² <https://www.a-place.eu/en/placemaking-activity/18>

3.2 “A Confined Place”, by School of Architecture La Salle, Urban Gorillas and City Space Architecture

As the COVID-19 pandemic limited our ability to carry out planned activities in physical space, we reacted to the unexpected situation by creating a new programme of activities – “A Confined Place” – to strengthen the sense of place during confinement. The activities, which were fully developed online³ (A Confined Place, 2020), dealt with the perception and representation of places using mixed media such as photography, video, graphics, and texts. The programme consisted of three types of activities: photographic representation of space for students in the partner institutions (Figure 6), artistic works with hybrid media through open call (Figure 7) and short films on the transformation of public spaces through a film competition. Through these activities, participants were able to share their artistic interpretation of the sense of place that emerged during this unprecedented global situation.

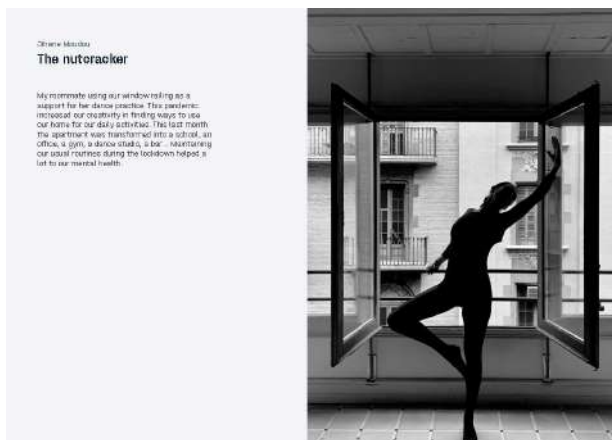


Figure 6. “The nutcracker”. Photograph by Jihane Moudou, student (La Salle School of Architecture). Domestic spaces were transformed to become working places, gyms, or dance studios.



Figure 7. “#AsocialPlace”, by Sophie Thiel and Miriam Cooler, winners of the first prize.

3.3 “A Delicious Place”, by Urban Gorillas

The Kaimakli neighbourhood in Nicosia is home to a diverse group of social groups, ages, and ethnicities, but there is little social interaction among them. The Pame Kaimakli annual festival aims to bring the communities together by reinforcing the bonds between them and with the public and private spaces.

This year’s activities explored the socio-cultural, artistic, and placemaking possibilities of collecting, elaborating and sharing food⁴. A variety of stakeholders participated, including elders, migrants, children, artists, local activists, and the local community at large. The activities included a series of dinners and walks (Figure 8) through the neighbourhood, the creation of a community vertical garden in the Agia Varvara square (Figure 9), the production of three video stories, a publication on the gardens of Kaimakli, and a pop-up cinema that screened international films, and video stories around the thematic of

³ <https://www.a-place.eu/en/placemaking-activity/22>

⁴ <https://www.a-place.eu/en/placemaking-activity/24>

food in other places. The presentation of local and international stories in videos that explored the same theme from different angles enhanced intercultural dialogue. Through the participation of local actors in the video productions, it was possible to give life to certain intangible community assets which contributed to creating stronger bonds among the people.



Figure 8. Kaimakli walk included 14 stops in the neighbourhood and storytelling from residents.



Figure 9. Community Planting event: 200 pots were planted to create a vertical garden.

3.4 “A Hidden Place”, by Faculty of Architecture, University of Ljubljana and prostoRož

An unused and fenced plot in the central part of Ljubljana, in the Bežigranski Dvor district, is not only physically detached from its surroundings, but also from the social and collective memory. The plot’s public face is the fence, which, together with the wild greenery behind it, shapes the surrounding streets.

The objective of the activities was to suggest new uses and invite young people and adults – residents, teachers from nearby schools, parents and relatives of children and young adults, as well as passers-by– to visit the site, inhabit it, and transform the enclosed area and the surrounding streets into places⁵. Due to the lockdown, onsite activities were limited, and it was only possible to organize walks with small student groups. Also, it was not possible to engage the local schools to the extent that had been initially envisioned. Architecture students, guided by faculty staff and by guest specialists in sociology and community planning, made proposals for temporary, semi-permanent interventions to attract people to the site.

A series of lectures on local vegetation and methods for ethnographic research helped architecture students broaden their design thinking beyond issues related to form and construction. A student competition was organized to award the intervention that would best contribute to activating the abandoned site, and to inform the community about the history of the place (Figures 10, 11). Through these activities, a vivid learning space was established, which combined knowledge and reflections from different professional disciplines (architecture, urban design, sociology, geography, arts etc.), artistic practice, tacit knowledge and experiences shared by students, artistic mentors, guest lecturers, and local community through interviews and opinion sharing.

⁵ <https://www.a-place.eu/en/placemaking-activity/19>



Figure 10. Winning proposal: symbolic onsite intervention by students Oriol Gracia Vallès and Lara Jana Gabrijel Milanovič. Photo: Pia Klančar..



Figure 11. Winning proposal: symbolic onsite intervention by students Oriol Gracia Vallès and Lara Jana Gabrijel Milanovič. Photo: Pia Klančar.

3.5 “A Sound Place”, by Universidade Nova de Lisboa

In recent years, the transformation of Martim Moniz square in the Mouraria district of Lisbon has been a subject of debate (Figure 12). Local associations have opposed the municipality’s plans to install a shopping centre, advocating instead to reduce traffic and to build a garden to create a pleasant place for residents.

The purpose of the activities was to contribute to the creation of a sense of place using the sounds of the neighbourhood, along with sounds from other places, to create musical pieces that would be performed in the square to transform it into a different kind of place⁶. However, due to lockdown restrictions, a streamed live concert took place in the Mouraria Innovation Center instead of the open space (Figure 13).



Figure 12. Martim Moniz square.



Figure 13. Live concert / Duo Contracello, Mouraria Innovation Centre.

Two pieces were performed by the Duo Contracello: A composition created by Jaime Reis and students from the Lisbon Superior Music School based on the sounds collected in the neighbourhood, together with imaginary sounds and memories of local communities, migrants, transient population, and artists, and a second composition from the young composer João Quinteiro, based on the story of an immigrant living in the

⁶ <https://www.a-place.eu/en/placemaking-activity/20>

vicinity of Mouraria and other inhabitants' stories of surrounding parishes. The authors of these compositions learned to listen to the sounds of the environment, relocating them, that is, decontextualizing and aestheticizing them.

These creative placemaking activities provided a unique opportunity for both students and listeners to explore and become aware of the existence of soundscapes, by collecting and transforming local sounds of life into musical compositions, and performing them in the designated spaces.

3.6 "A Visionary Place", by City Space Architecture

A parklet was installed in the Porto-Saragozza neighbourhood in Bologna as part of the preparatory activities of the Urban Visions festival. Three parking spots located in front of the headquarters of City Space Architecture (Figure 14), the organizer of the festival, were transformed into a temporary public space dedicated to cultural and artistic activities. The intervention received the support of the municipality, through the programme "Strade Aperte", initiated by grassroots organizations working together with architects and designers, with the goal of making public spaces more inclusive, greener and more pedestrian-friendly⁷.

Two events took place in the parklet in October and November 2020. The first event, a language workshop in English "Come and speak English at the Parklet!" in collaboration with TWYO language training institute, offered children and adults, regardless of their previous knowledge of the language, the opportunity to talk, listen, and ask questions to English teachers. The second event was a performance by StaMurga, a group of young artists, featuring live music and dance. "Murga" is a form of street theatre that combines percussion, dance, singing and acting, and it is meant to be an instrument of peaceful, noisy and colourful dissent (Figure 15).



Figure 14. Parklet in Via Curiel 13/d, Bologna.



Figure 15. StaMurga live performance in the parklet.

Through the creation of a new place in the public realm and the organisation of a cultural program of cross-disciplinary activities, we started a process of capacity building on the importance of public space, for and with the community. The artistic performance organized in the parklet is an example of the transformation of a public

⁷ <https://www.a-place.eu/en/placemaking-activity/17>

space to make it more inclusive for people from different creative fields, and it could become part of a network of artistic practices.

3.7 “A Weaved Place”, by School of Architecture La Salle and Sitesize

The purpose of this programme of activities was to bring together architecture students and faculty, artists and citizens to reflect on the sense of place and collective identity in the city of L’Hospitalet in the metropolitan area of Barcelona⁸. The planned activities included a joint analysis of the socio-physical territory conducted by students, faculty and residents, as well as participatory activities in public spaces and cultural and civic associations. Due to the lockdown, the activities could not be carried out in person, so digital environments and tools were used instead.

The students in the programme carried out a visual cartography of the city in two stages: first, exploring the areas around a specific coordinate point using Google Earth and then communicating their findings to classmates, faculty, and the community through a public blog. After the visual mapping, students conducted research on the activities of civic and cultural associations that were engaged in community building.

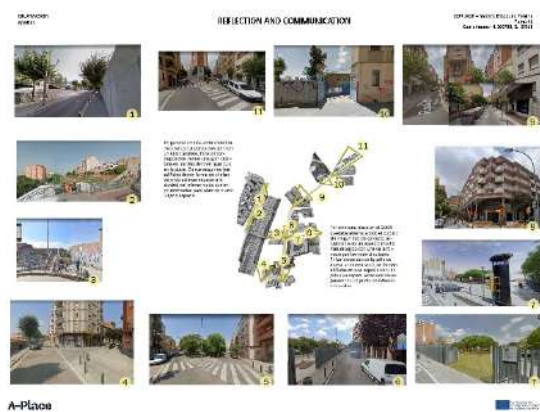


Figure 16. Spatial dilation. Martina Blázquez, student. A description of the spaces found along the path followed by the student, referring to the elements that defined the spaces and their connectivity.

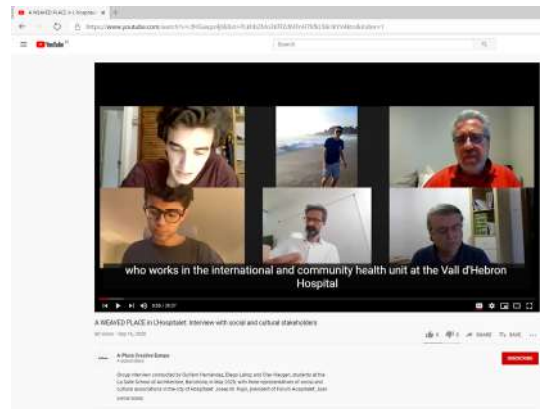


Figure 17. Group interview of students with representatives of social and cultural associations. Guillem Hernández, Diego Lahoz and Olav Hauge, students.

They prepared questionnaires and conducted interviews based on four topics: 1. “Caring city”, which focused on how the city protects its inhabitants and provides means for their wellbeing (health, education, poverty), 2. “Diverse city”, which examined how the city embraces, respects and preserves the diversity in terms of origin, religious, culture and race 3. “Metabolic city”, which looked at how the city makes proper use of resources (materials, energy, information) to maintain city life and 4. “Emergency city”, which explored how the city reacts to situations derived from natural, economic and health crises. Finally, the students produced videos of the interviews which were processed by faculty members to create a series of short videos on key topics (e.g. constructing relationships, using public spaces, sense of belonging) that were disseminated through social media (Figure 17). Through contact with citizens

⁸ <https://www.a-place.eu/en/placemaking-activity/14>

of different origins and backgrounds, individual and group interviews, and their dissemination through social media, the programme aims to raise awareness in the community about the value of public space in the construction of a sense of belonging.

4. Reflections from actions

The activities implemented in the first year of A-Place covered a variety of public spaces such as plots and parks, squares and streets, in urban areas at various scales, such as blocks and neighbourhoods), located within the urban fabric of the six participating cities.

Professionals from various disciplines –architects, artists, film makers, and designers– have participated in the design, planning and implementation of the activities. Students from art and architecture, along with faculty members, were engaged in action research and learning, studying the socio-physical environments, in collaboration with experts from diverse disciplines and with residents. All of these components –areas, disciplines, actors– were combined in a distinctive way in each of the placemaking activities.

However, despite the specific conditions of each setting, it is possible to identify some common strategies to address key issues for the re-appropriation of shared spaces:

- **Situated learning.** The emplacement of learning in action research relies on the direct exposure of learners to a place and its history, as well as to people who can describe a place through their life experiences. This includes a visual exploration of a physical territory, both on-site and on-line, which helps to create mental maps of the territory. However, to truly understand the meanings embodied in the socio-physical territory, it is necessary to engage in conversations with people and to access historical records of the experiences of past generations. This was done through the interviews in the city of L'Hospitalet, the recording of sounds in Lisbon's Mouraira neighbourhood, and the walks and videos produced with residents in Nicosia's Kaimakli.

- **Sustainability.** Increasing people's awareness of sustainability – social, economic, and environmental – is a key objective of placemaking. Unveiling the essential features of a place, which may have been hidden or forgotten over time, can help to maintain cultural traditions, which is an important aspect of social sustainability. Exploring the urban territory of the city of L'Hospitalet through the testimonies of the first dwellers and involving residents in the production of video stories about traditions with local food in Nicosia, are attempts to revive a foundational time in the development of an urban area, a city or a neighbourhood, and are part of a process of reviewing and reconstructing the traditions of places. Learning about natural resources, fauna and vegetation, local traditions (crafts, food) helps people to understand the essential characteristics of a place and to appreciate the need to preserve them, making them more aware of environmental sustainability. This was done in Ljubljana by learning about the indigenous vegetation invading the fenced plot and in Nicosia, by collecting and caring for plants in public space.

- **Community building.** The participation of communities in the activities took on multiple forms and served various objectives. In the parklet in Bologna, residents were invited to re-imagine a parking lot as educational space; in L'Hospitalet, civic representatives and neighbours reflected on the issues that determine their relationship with the streets and other public spaces, at the neighbourhood and city scale; in Schaerbeek, a diversity of actors came together in ephemeral interventions which gave

rise to temporary communities of students and residents. Through their participation in these events, citizens were encouraged to discover the issues affecting their relationship with their living environment, and, in this way, to define the qualities and values they assign to it.

- **Sensorial experience.** Enhancing people's sensorial awareness about their living environment, in urban and natural settings, helps to re-establish lost connections between the body and space. The sensorial walk in Schaerbeek and the recording of sounds in Mouraria, contributed to enhancing the sensitivity towards the living environment. City sounds, tastes, and smells are part of a place's identity. The activities helped people to become aware of their presence and value.

- **Temporality.** Ephemeral and temporary interventions which can last from hours, to days or months, are well-established tactics for introducing changes in the socio-physical environments. Such community-embedded, incremental and experimental practices can serve as a way to develop adaptive and responsive long-term projects that address community concerns. Examples of temporary actions include the transformation of the Place de la Reine in Schaerbeek into a repository of memories and a setting for a multicultural event; the parklet in Bologna as an educational space for residents to learn English; the square in Nicosia becoming a collective construction of pots and plants brought by residents, and the signs left in the fence of the empty plot of Ljubljana. These temporary actions activate a place and raise awareness in the community about local history and socio-spatial challenges.

- **Performativity.** The experimental modes of placemaking integrated art and artistic performances to connect people to places and imagine the future of those places. An example of this is the live concert-installation performance in Lisbon, which was inspired by both the real and the imaginary sounds of the square and surrounding streets. The performance of the pieces composed by music students invited people to imagine and reinvent their perception of indifferent spaces through the artistic transformation of its sounds, ultimately turning them into pleasant places. The performance of the Turkish music ensemble Schaerbeek articulated "other spaces" of mutual respect and harmony in contrast with the stigmatized nature of the neighbourhood, and aimed to create a future alternative reality. Finally, the music performance in the parklet in Bologna transformed a parking lot into a performative public space.

5. Conclusion

The activities carried out in the first year of the project represent a first step in the process of constructing a network of places across locations, cultures, actors, and disciplines, spanning the partner cities and beyond. Through reflections about the work done in the first cycle, it has been possible to identify strategies that can help to strengthen the links across the network in the next three years of the project. The different components that make up a network of places –both material and immaterial– the different values of public space –such as communication, leisure, performative and educational spaces – and the different time dimensions of the events taking place in them –hours, days or weeks– have emerged in the project activities. The project has also delved deeper than expected into the territory of digital space as a result of the constraints imposed by the lockdown. This includes the exploitation of the

potential of digital media in creating blended learning spaces embedded in the community (online focus interviews, analysis of urban territories with digital media), and online activities to foster creativity during confinement (open calls, film festival). In addition, the project activities have also contributed to the use of digital tools to enhance the experience of public space and to encourage people to engage with their surroundings in new and meaningful ways. Furthermore, the use of digital platforms and social media to disseminate the results of the research and activities helped to reach a wider audience and raise awareness about the importance of public space in the construction of a sense of belonging.

The diversity of tactics and forms of communication undertaken by partners to carry out the activities has enriched the capacities of each organization involved in the project. The exchange of this know-how will positively affect second year activities, and will most definitely contribute to enriching the diversity of issues that constitute each node of the network that is being constructed in the project, and their relationship to others.

Future placemaking activities to be carried out in the project will focus on further developing the evaluation of their impact. This should include a comprehensive examination of the real and potential impacts, both at the individual and societal level. Additionally, it will be important to consider the long-term consequences of placemaking in order to fully understand its significance.

Acknowledgement

The placemaking activities described in this article have been designed and implemented by the A-Place partnership: School of Architecture La Salle, Spain (project coordinator), KU Leuven, Belgium; Alive Architecture, Belgium; Urban Gorillas, Cyprus; City Space Architecture, Italy; and Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal; University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; prostoRož, Slovenia; and Screen Projects, Spain. A-Place is co-funded by the Creative Europe programme 2019-23, Project Agreement number 607457-CREA-I-2019-I-ES-CULT-COOP2.

References

- Andron, S. (2018) Selling streetness as experience: The role of street art tours in branding the creative city. *The Sociological Review*, 66(5), pp. 1036-1057.
- Çelik, Z., Favro, D. G. and Ingersoll, R. (1994) 'Street and the Urban Process' in Çelik, Z., Favro, D. G. and Ingersoll, R. (eds.). *Streets: critical perspectives on public space*. University of California Press.
- De Brito, M. and Richards, G. (2017) 'Events and placemaking', *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 8(1), pp. 8-23. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313444810_Events_and_placemaking (Accessed 14 Jan. 2023)
- Edensor, T. (2015) 'Light art, perception, and sensation', *The Senses and Society*, 10(2), pp. 138-157.
- Evans, J., Karvonen, A. and Raven, R. (eds.) (2016) *The experimental city*. Londo ; New York : Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Franck, K. and Stevens, Q. (eds.) (2006) *Loose space: possibility and diversity in urban life*. London; New York: Routledge, 2006.

- Habermas, J. (1984) *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kahne, J. (2015) 'Does Placemaking Cause Gentrification? It's Complicated' [Online]. Available at: <https://www.pps.org/article/gentrification> (Accessed 14 Jan. 2023)
- Kelkar, N. P. and Spinelli, G. (2016) 'Building social capital through creative placemaking', *Strategic Design Research Journal*, 9(2), pp.54-66. Available at: <https://bura.brunel.ac.uk/bitstream/2438/14013/1/FullText.pdf> (Accessed 14 Jan. 2023)
- Landry, C., Greene, L., Matarasso, F. and Bianchini, F. (1996) *The art of regeneration. Urban renewal through cultural activity* [Online]. Available at: <https://illuminart.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/indonesia-charleslandry-artofregeneration.pdf> (Accessed 14 Jan. 2023)
- Lepofsky, J. and Fraser, J.C. (2003) 'Building community citizens: Claiming the right to placemaking in the city'. *Urban studies*, 40(1), pp.127-142.
- Löw, M. (2016) *The sociology of space: materiality, social structures, and action*. Translated by Donald Goodwin. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lydon, M. and Garcia, A. (2015) *Tactical urbanism: short-term action for long-term change*. Washington: Island Press.
- Madrazo, L. (ed.) (2020) *Planning of local activities 2019-2020* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.a-place.eu/en/reports/12> (Accessed 14 Jan. 2023)
- Massey, D. (1994) *Space, place and gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. London: SAGE.
- Miller, J. (2021) *The Politics of Perception and the Aesthetics of Social Change*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Parolek, D. (2014) *The Power of Public Art: How Murals Beautify Cities and Build Communities*. Available at: <https://opticosdesign.com/blog/the-power-of-public-art-murals/> (Accessed 14 Jan. 2023)
- Project for Public Spaces (2007) *What Is Placemaking?* [Online] Available at: <https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking> (Accessed 14 Jan. 2023)
- Relph, E. (1976) *Place and placelessness*. London: Pion.
- Schacter, R. (2014) 'The ugly truth: Street art, graffiti and the creative city', *Art & the Public Sphere*, 3(2), 161-176.
- Schön, D. (1983) *The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Silva, P. (2016) 'Tactical urbanism: Towards an evolutionary cities' approach?', *Environment and Planning B: Planning and design*, 43(6), pp. 1040-1051.
- Tuan, Y. F. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.
- Tamke, M., Nicholas, P. and Ramsgaard Thomsen, M. (2017) 'What does it mean to make an experiment?', *Impact by designing: proceedings of the 3rd ARENA Annual Conference*, 6-7 April 2017 at KU Leuven, Faculty of Architecture, Campus Sint-Lucas, Brussels.
- Tonkiss, F. (2013) *Cities by design. The social life of urban form*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Treskon, M., Esthappan, S., Okeke, C. and Vásquez-Noriega, C. (2018) *Creative placemaking and community safety synthesizing cross-cutting themes* [Online]. Available at: https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99037/synthesis_-_creative_placemaking.pdf (Accessed 14 Jan. 2023)
- Ujang, N. and Zakariya, K. (2015) 'The notion of place, place meaning and identity in urban regeneration', *Procedia-social and behavioral sciences*, vol. 170, pp. 709-717.
- Verbeke, J. (2013) 'This is Research by Design' in Fraser, M. (ed.) *Design research in architecture: an overview*. Burlington: Ashgate, pp. 137-159.

- Vienna Declaration of Artistic Research (2014) [Online]. Available at: https://cultureactioneurope.org/files/2020/06/Vienna-Declaration-on-AR_corrected-version_24-June-20-1.pdf (Accessed 14 Jan. 2023)
- Wolfrum, S. and Brandis, N. (eds.) (2015) *Performative urbanism. Generating and designing urban space*. Jovis.
- Wyckoff, M. A. (2014) 'Definition of placemaking: four different types', *Planning & Zoning News*, 2014, vol. 32, no 3, p. 1 [Online]. Available at: <http://pznews.net/media/13f25a9fff4cf18ffff8419ffaf2815.pdf> (Accessed 14 Jan. 2023)
- Zamani, F., McMeel, D. and Manfredini, M. (2014) 'Digital technologies and the production of spaces of resistance', *International Contemporary Urban Issues Conference on Rethinking the Informality*. Istanbul, 13-15 November.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2001) 'Action learning and action research: paradigm, praxis and programs' in Sankara, S., Dick, B. and Passfield, R. (eds) *Effective change management through action research and action learning: Concepts, perspectives, processes and applications*. Lismore: Southern Cross University Press, pp. 1-20.
- Zupančič, T. (2020) 'Design as a Hybrid Driver of Research', *CA2RE/CA2RE+ Conference*, Milan, 28-20 October.
- Zupančič, T. (2021) 'Reflection on Originality, Relevance and Rigour in Design-driven Doctoral Training', *CA2RE/CA2RE+ Conference*, Hafen City University Hamburg, Hamburg, 24-28 March.

Public Space, Public Art, and the Revolution. Reflections on Sudan's "Nile Spring" 2019 Sit-In Space

Ibrahim Zakaria Bahreldin

King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

iyassein@kau.edu.sa

Abstract

Since the Arab spring in 2011, public space and public art have been progressively central to urban planning and design literature. The recent social movements and reform discourse in the Sudanese cities exhibit that public space and public art have come to the fore in the civil uprising of December 2018 and its associated sit-in space. While many studies have examined public spaces in Khartoum, only a few have looked at them from the perspective of activism and public art. Yet, the post-2018 uprising has rendered these topics critical and compelling to researchers. This research reflects upon the transformation and events in the Khartoum sit-in space during the December uprising. Our article aims to document and analyse the public art and graffiti presented in the sit-in space in Khartoum. This research tries to answer two main questions: What role does public art and graffiti play in the revolution? Moreover, how does this role influence the quality of public space in general and the sit-in space in particular? The methodology used in this article includes direct observation, interviews, and follow-up of written and photographic material from the sit-in space and online and written resources. The results exhibited in this article show that public art and graffiti played five significant roles in the sit-in space. Public art also transformed the sit-in space aesthetics and the conception of public art and how it is produced and consumed.

Keywords: public arts and graffiti, public space, December revolution 2018, the "Nile Spring", Khartoum, Sudan

To cite this article:

Bahreldin, I. Z. (2022) "Public Space, Public Art, and The Revolution: Reflections on Sudan's Nile Spring 2019 Sit-In Space", *The Journal of Public Space*, 7(3). pp. 45-64. doi: 10.32891/jps.v7i3.1200.

This article has been double blind peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

1. Introduction

The value of public space was not once so passionately deliberated on a global scale as it has been since the emergence of the Arab revolutions (Abaza, 2014). The occupy movements have drawn interest within urban design and planning about the role of public space as an arena of democratic action and political change and art as a tool of resistance. There is a need for work to be done to understand space and how it is produced and used (Beqaj, 2016). Such work is essential given the increased importance of space as a political (Lefebvre, 1991; Harvey, 2009), social (Jacobs, 1961; Gehl, 2010), and cultural (Gehl, 2007; Naamani and Simpson, 2021) domain observed worldwide. In Khartoum, anyone who can recall the city on April 6th, 2019, and the days afterward, will recollect the hundreds of thousands of people who went outside to gather in a place that was created by themselves. The revolutionary moment triggered by the occupation of the sit-in space in April 2019 was unlike any other protest action which had taken place in Sudan's modern history (Bahreldin, 2021). The occupation of the sit-in space has set up a new chapter not only in Sudan's political history but also in how public spaces are defined, produced, and appropriated. Such change would not have been possible without all the activities in the "al-Qeyada"¹ sit-in during the "Nile Spring," transforming a space once two parallel one-way streets into one of the most vibrant public spaces in Sudan's history.

The sit-in space occupation in Khartoum has enlightened us about a fundamental transformation in the intensity and modalities of the systems that provide and manage urban spaces (Bahreldin, 2021). These types of change are documented globally and, to a lesser extent, in the Sudanese literature. As a result, many activities and encounters have arisen aiming at keeping what is owned by the public "publicly available." These activities include various urban activism methods to reclaim public space. Nevertheless, while comprehensively performed by protesters and investigated by the literature, the function of public art in the occupied public space remains challenging and only fairly comprehended. The understanding of the role of public art in temporary urban spaces has not been offered adequate attention,

This article is situated within the current debates about public space politics and dynamism and the complexities of its production in cities during the revolution. It shapes a portion of a more extensive study on public space and politics. It profoundly builds on the ongoing, research titled "Between politics and social life: the ambivalence of contemporary urban public space in Sudan."

2. Objectives, research questions, and methodology

This paper reflects on Khartoum city and the sit-in space initiated by the protestors in the *al-Qeyada* area, reconnoitring the events that followed April 6th, 2019, when protestors gathered in the sit-in in front of the army headquarter, by the end of which numerous were killed in the chaos that ended the sit-in on June 3rd, 2019. Through studying the sit-in space in Khartoum, this paper aims to reflect upon some of the significant public art transformations and their functions during the December 2018 revolution.

¹ "al-Qeyada" is a local Arabic term used to represent the area around the Army headquarter in Khartoum

First, we discuss how people reclaim public space in Khartoum, which was decisive in making public spaces "public," allowing for making "public" art more visible and functional. Next, we focus on the role of public art during the 2018 Sudanese uprising, which seemed, at first glance, to be the latest wave of 'growing uprising in response to the current crisis of urban justice and equality in the Sudanese public spaces. The objective is to document and understand some of the public art functions that followed the sit-in space in Khartoum and analyse how they are produced and thus affect the sit-in atmosphere. This research tries to answer two main questions; What role does public art and graffiti play in the revolution? Furthermore, how does this role affect the quality of public space in general and the sit-in space in particular? Since the author could only eyewitness the last five days of the sit-in space in Khartoum, this article does not try to be ethnographic research. Therefore, the methodology underlines this research includes limited direct observation but mainly focuses on interviews and documentation of written and photographic material from the sit-in, online, and written resources.

3. Sudan's 2018 Revolution 'the Nile Spring'

The falling living standards, inequalities, increasing taxes, and the continuous wars observed during the al-Bahir regime have triggered massive anti-government movements throughout the country. More than nine cities in Sudan have joined the peaceful efforts of the December revolution that aims at ousting al-Bashir and the ruling party (the National Congress) from power. After four months of the nonstop uprising, protestors decided to march to the military headquarters in Khartoum to either neutralize or get the support of the military in their cause. On April 6th, 2019, protestors made it to the space in front of the army headquarter "*al-Qeyada*," starting the first mass political sit-in in Sudan's modern history. The sit-in, that lasted for fifty-eight days prior to its violent dispersed, has produced one of the most memorable multifunctional political spaces in a space that was previously a couple of parallel streets. The story of the sit-in and the activities and events that followed have been an inspiration for citizens and researchers for many decades. The diagram in Figure I shows the main events that followed Sudan's Nile Spring uprising.

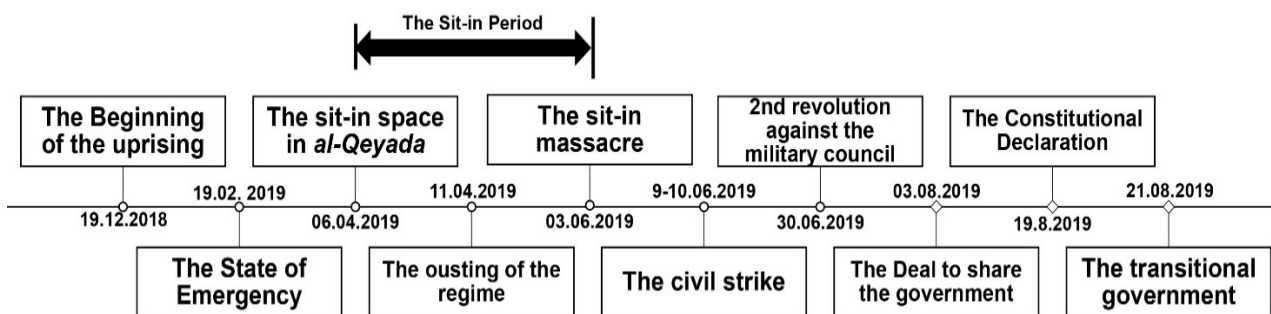


Figure I. Timeline shows the "Nile Spring" main events 2018-2019.

4. How people reclaim public space in Khartoum

Khartoum is the largest and most populous region in Sudan. As a capital city, it is favoured with many services, functions, and activities other Sudanese towns do not have. The city's primacy has been questioned for decades as one of the reasons why balanced urban development in Sudan was not achieved yet (Agraa *et al.*, 1985; Ahmad, 2000; Hafzallah, 2008; Bahreldin and Hamid, 2018). The city is heavily administrative and suffers from economic decline (El-Bushra and Hijazi, 1995), increasing population (Bahreldin, Suleiman and Osman, 2014), and environmental degradation (Hamid and Bahreldin, 2013). Between 1956 and 2011, the capital region underwent four planning attempts, which did not yield fruitful results. The last is the current Khartoum Structure Plan (2018-2030).

In the last three decades, Khartoum has been branded by the scarcity of public realm and spaces that accommodate the diverse citizen's spectrum. Inhabitants are detached into social classes, reflecting in distinct spatial domains. This decline in the public realm occurs in almost all public spaces, including parks, squares, riverfront, and even neighbourhood parks. The segregation observed above makes it difficult to produce a successful public space that includes everyone. Additionally, the implementation of most of the previous plans has ignored both the distribution and the quality of these public spaces. Since the al-Bashir military coup in 1989, political power has contentiously shaped the public realm in Khartoum. Accordingly, architects and urban planners did not play an active and decisive role in developing and reshaping social, cultural, and political encounters in public spaces and squares. Most of the public spaces were symbolized or appropriated to exhibit the power of the state (Bahreldin, 2021). Public spaces that show otherwise were controlled, prohibited, or regulated. Such control was achieved through ongoing privatization, ignorance, and closure of public spaces. Examples include the closure of the "Mefroosh"² event in *Atanie* open space, which was considered by many as a domain of the freedom of public arts and culture, and the shutdown of Aziz Art Center in the "Six of April" park in 2017.

Hence, the city is rapidly ceasing to be a space for public interaction or an "anthropological space" (Bahreldin, 2021). For decades, we have observed a phenomenon of fundamental transformation in the structures that deliver and manage urban public spaces in Khartoum. These types of change are documented in the Sudanese literature fostering that Khartoum's public spaces are considered numerous and oversized (Ministry of Environment & UN-Habitat, 2014), vast and harmful (Hamid, 2016). Additionally, Khartoum public spaces are highly privatized (Bahreldin, 2005), neglected (Ahmad, 2000; Hamid, 2016), segregated (Al-Karib, 2019) and underdeveloped (Awad, 2018). Therefore, Khartoum has been re-branded by the scarcity of public realm and spaces that accommodate all citizens (Bahreldin, 2021). Consequently, the previously mentioned notions in planning and designing Khartoum public spaces have produced numerous conflicts and struggle of which space was both constituent and a container (Bahreldin, 2020). As a result, many inhabitants opt to make their cities their own by repossessing the streets and public spaces, hence reclaiming them. We value that public spaces are the location of class struggle and contestation of neoliberal programs and policies (Hutchison and Teixeira Lopes, 2016). Additionally,

² Mefroosh is one of the most vibrant private/public spaces in Khartoum downtown. Historically, it accommodates the famous *Atanie* coffee shop, a meeting spot for many tourists and locals.

space is a domain where spatial components- materials, volumes, colours, and heights mingle with other elements such as space uses, flows, perceptions, mental associations, and systems of representation (Attia, 2011). For these reasons, understanding how those spaces are produced, appropriated, and reclaimed is essential to understand the space politics manifested in the revolution space, such as Khartoum's sit-in.

Reclaiming public space generally includes many social, economic, and spatial forces (Hou, 2010; Attia, 2011; Carmona, 2015). The process of producing public spaces and repossessing (reclaiming) them responds nicely to the Hou's spatial duality. Jeffery Hou notes that there are ultimately two kinds of public spaces: institutionalized and "insurgent" spaces (Hou, 2010). Referring to the importance of "insurgent spaces", Hou explained that public space must be "enacted" – occupied, used- for it to be genuinely public (Hou, 2010). For Hou, the act of using the space is what makes it a public and authentic space. This analogy was also shared by Kirsch (1995) who separated the space in terms of "production" and "Adaptation," in which the latter seems to be more related to social groups and communities, especially in less democratic societies. Building on this, we can observe three modalities of how public space is adapted or "reclaimed" in Khartoum.



Figure 2. Atypical organization of a group of Sitat- Ashai in Khartoum streets. Photographed by the author.

Ephemeral urbanism activities are forms of appropriation and reclamation of public space by the public. These forms can be strong engines for social change while energizing citizens to reclaim their public space. One of the typical ephemeral urbanisms in Khartoum is the various placemaking activities observed. "Placemaking" has emerged as an approach in which inhabitants transform their public spaces, boosting the connection between them and the places. Much evidence is observed in Khartoum, where placemaking facilitated public space use and sometimes even privately owned spaces such as the Atanei square in Khartoum downtown and Midan Al-moulid in Omdurman. Streets are also massively reclaimed during the month of Ramadan through the *Iftar* (the evening meal with which Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast). As part of

placemaking strategies, many public activities are used as tools to reclaim public space. These activities might include festivals, football matches, Sitat- Ashai (women-run makeshift street cafe), and street art.



Figure 3. Al-moulid in Omdurman, an example of privately owned space that is used for public activities and interactions. Photographed by the author.

Secondly, In the last two decades, Khartoum's public spaces have materialized as spatial domains in which revolutionary actions occur and as a political element in the production of an uprising. Cities' spaces of resistance (public spaces such as Taksim, Tahrir, Zuccotti Park, and Khartoum sit-in) may speak about an essential method of claiming public space. Various protest movements sprung up to deny, prevent or object to an action that would restrain citizens' access to public space or lifestyle. The three previous Sudanese revolutions (the December 2018 uprising, the April intifada of 1985, and October 1964) were all manifested and associated with the political reclamation of public space (Bahreldin, 2021). In 1985 intifada public spaces were highly used as spaces of resistance. Street art also mobilized the public through slogans painted on walls (Berridge, 2016). In 2018, protestors in the Khartoum sit-in reclaimed that space and appropriated it to fit their needs and functions (Bahreldin, 2021). The extreme spatial manifestation of public space reclamation throughout the December 2018 uprising has made public space a container of the revolution and a constituent (Bahreldin, 2021). Another form of reclaiming the public space in Khartoum is reclaiming Neighbourhood public space by establishing new interaction zones, such as gardens, fences and seating for adjacent residential zones. Additionally, integrating the social environment into the physical environment in specific public spaces is an excellent example of how people are taking it upon themselves to change their physical environment to make a statement of some kind that feeds into reclaiming their public spaces. In this regard, streets are increasingly used for social activities, including weddings, praying, and playing (Hamid, 2016). A slightly different version of this reclamation occurs when residents plan to develop their own public spaces. This form of reclamation is like placemaking but

involves many permanent and organized efforts by local communities that sometimes privatize the common. By doing so, citizens precede the public space privatization process that uses the underdevelopment of these spaces as an excuse for privatization (Awad, 2021).

Finally, in the post-2018 uprising in Sudan, a novel reclaiming of public space was done through the Tamkeen Removal Committee (Lagnat Izalet al-Tamkeen). This committee is a high-level committee assigned to trace and recover government money stolen by operatives of the defunct regime under their notorious drive known as Tamkeen (literally empowering themselves, the Islamists)(YH.AS, 2020). This reclamation does not necessarily relate to how people use the space but to who owns the common. In this sense, the reclamation of public space by the committee does not imply "adaptation" of public space as defined by Kirsch (1995), rather it is more to the "production" of the space. The committee has confiscated and recovered many public spaces for public ownership, including clubs, the child city (children's playground), the al-Riyadh family park, and many others.

5. Khartoum, and it is Sit-in Space

Khartoum sit-in in the *al-Qeyada* area represents an alternative form of public space. Positioned in a very central location within the capital region of Sudan in a place historically known as a domain that exhibits military power. The space before and after the revolution is far from being considered a public domain. The sit-in extends through multiple layers of road networks and access points. This space, which measures 27.5 hectares was the centre of various activities, and debates during Sudan's December uprising.

The accessibility of public transport to the sit-in space is quite excellent. Many transportation lines run at the edges of the sit-in extending for kilometres inside Khartoum and Khartoum North urban fabric. Protestors established three bus stops named "*Tasgut Bes*" (Just Fall, that is all) and ended up at the sit-in from the East and the West. This excellent accessibility has increased the sit-in event's visibility and impact. While it is not clear why protestors have chosen this space in particular for their sit-in, Bahreldin, 2021 argues that the sit-in represents the ongoing struggle over public space. As public space in Khartoum is increasingly becoming "representational space." The "Nile Spring" has no place to translate its demands into a physical space but the streets and some neighbourhood playgrounds. Under such conditions, it was feasible for protestors to occupy a space just a combination of parallel roads that symbolized the state power and made it their political domain and spaces of "representation."

Nonetheless, the occupation of this space has transformed it into a significant public domain. Several spatial elements were constructed as soon as protestors gained control over that space. For instance, barricades were built to protect their occupied space, open platforms and stages for public speaking and performances were constructed, and spaces for security and media rooms were prepared. Many other functions were also temporarily built, including spaces for street vendors and commercial uses, and areas for services such as toilets, drinking, and food supplies, thus creating a focal point in the vast space.

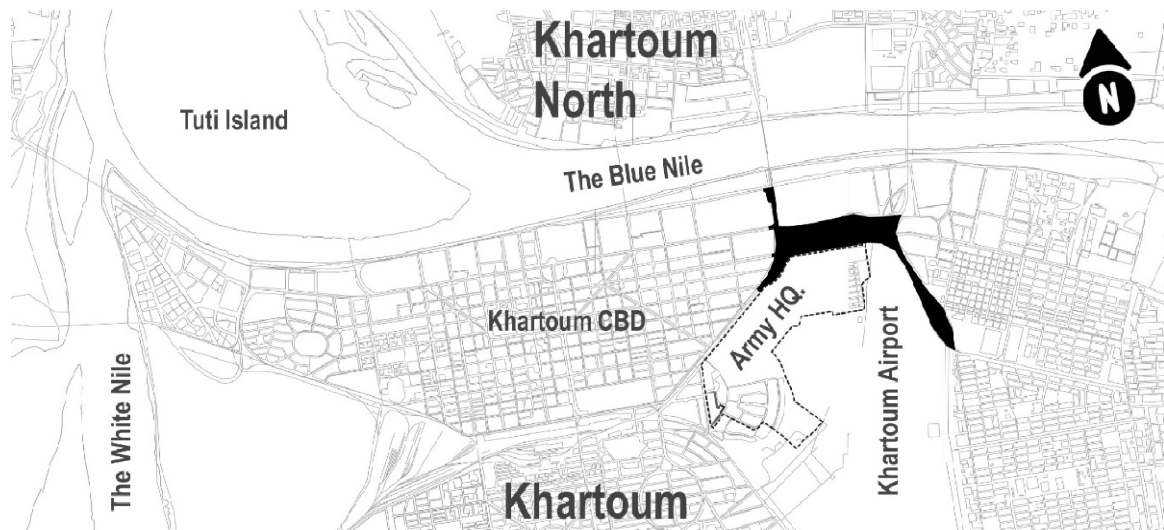


Figure 4. The location of Khartoum's sit-in within the city of Khartoum (marked with black).



Figure 5. Drone photo taken on April 6th 2019 (the first day of the sit-in) showing the floods of protestors and the boundaries of the Khartoum sit-in. Photographed by Waddah Hago.

6. Arts and Graffiti Symbolisms and functions in the sit-in space

The use of public art as an instrument of protest and place generation is not a new practice. Public Art artists often use public space to critique the sphere where political, social, and economic contestations occur. When the political system or government lack accountability, public or street art denotes a rebellious and populist "do-it-yourself" (DIY) attitude (Iveson, 2013). What happens during the December uprising sit-in space activities testify to the previous statement.

During the December uprising, street art was used to mock the al-Bashir regime and to express citizen demands for change. Graffiti, sculptures, murals, reliefs, and art objects are all subjects that have participated in transforming the character of the sit-in space

and other parts of the city into a fortress of beauty and political messages (Bahreldin, 2020). However, it is imperative to note that public art in the sit-in space was not only characterized by the abovementioned elements. Other innovation elements, including the open-air museum, which exhibits the loot that protestors claimed from regime soldiers during the revolution, is a unique form of public art shown in the sit-in (Bahreldin, 2020). Also, some protesters consider the cultural diversity and the gathering process in the sit-in space as art, "*with people from all over the country; the sit-in space was a gigantic social and cultural graffiti*" (Hammad, 2019).



Figure 6. The public exhibition billboard pole that exhibits the loot from the regime police and security forces. Photographed by the author.

The functions of street art and graffiti in the sit-in are ephemeral forms and drawings representing Kurt Iveson's notions of DIY urbanism. By examining 56 art pieces, from graffiti, wall drawings, asphalt sketches, and paper posters, we identified five primary public art functions in the sit-in space.

First and foremost, street arts showcase a platform to communicate and receive direct and indirect messages. Public art can explore ideas and concepts, promote a specific political viewpoint, challenge assumptions, and support causes. Through public arts, protestors created vibrant messaging platforms that send and receive several types of messages to multiple recipients/senders (Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 7

Figure 10). The messages are political, social, cultural, and even messages that help them organize and manage their sit-in space. This powerful messaging platform also targeted those reluctant citizens that did not get involved in the uprising. The art-oriented messaging platform also seems to have targeted local and international communities. The language used in most of the graffiti and public arts exhibits the revolution known slogan "*Freedom, peace and justice.*"

While the function of art as a messaging platform is not novel to the Sudanese public art as it was used in the April intifada in 1985 in Sudan (Berridge, 2016), its impedance in the Khartoum sit-in is different in many ways, one of which is the extensive use of social media as an alternative public art platform. This was generally manifested through Facebook and Twitter during the uprising and a web page after the sit-in was dispersed. For instance, the Sudanese artists have inaugurated a webpage with many sit-in artworks³. The internet and social media have thus expanded the spatiality of the sit-in beyond the physical space. Internet impacted the sit-in public art functionality by providing an efficient messaging platform that boasted the messages of the revolution to the global recipient. The public is no longer country-specific but globally defined (Gamman, 2019).



Figure 7. The work of Galal Yousif urging protestors not to leave the sit-in until freedom, peace, and justice are achieved. Photographed by the author.

To accentuate on the use of public art as a messaging platform it would be crucial to dive into some examples and observation of this function. The messages that are sent through art activities in the sit-in space transcend beyond space and time of which it was created. Some message in the sit-in reacted to issues that occur in the past or ongoing issues, hence providing a visual source of history and everyday life. For instance, the graffiti in Figure 6 by Eisra Awad speaks of the role the women played in the different stage of the revolution. This role extends beyond the December 2019 uprising (Adlan, 2019). Other reacts to issues that occurs hundred kilometers from the sit-in space, thus, extending the spatiality of the public art and the sit-in space.

³ In late 2019, the Sudanese artists launched an exciting website that documents many of the murals and artwork of the sit-in. it can be accessed at <https://sudanrevolutionart.org>

One of the clear observations regarding the sit-in art is the extensive use of written statement along the artwork. We assumed artist realizes the gap between the art they produce and the public, thus tried to bridge it through injecting written statement into their artwork. But it would perhaps be a misguided assumption as Gamman argue that the use of text is to ensure the clarity of messages delivered (Gamman, 2019). Another observation on this section is that the language used in many morals and artwork is not common to the public. While the graffiti expresses to the spectrum of protestors, the terms used are generally utilized by the youth. These expressions portray the impedance of the strong youth participation in the revolution (Adlan, 2019).



Figure 8. A graffiti by an unknown artist that shows the strength of the revolution by transforming chains into a new peaceful Sudan. Photographed by the author.

Words like “*Sabinneha*” and “*deseis*” which stands for “we will stand strong” and “that is good” respectively are highly used in the moral and graffiti from one side, and the sit-in space in the other. The previous two word are known to be used among the youth community in Sudan.

Secondly, street art and graffiti provided a platform for collective memory through the documentation of the events of the revolution. Numerous artworks in the sit-in and around the city recorded most of the daily activities of the revolutions. Some of these events include 1) women's participation in the uprising; 2) those who have fallen during the “Nile Spring”; 3) the cultural diversity of the sit-in; 4) the slogans chanted during the revolution; 5) the support protestors received from the lower-rank army officers in the sit-in; 6) and the peacefulness of the uprising.



Figure 9. One of the most famous graffiti exhibits the face of the revolution martyr painted on the walls of the University of Khartoum. Photographed by Ali Gaffar.



Figure 10. A graffiti by Eisra Awad documents women's participation in the revolution. Photographed by the author.

Thirdly, public art plays a decorative role in the sit-in space and the barricades. Protestors compete against each other to make the sit-in space and the barricades look beautiful through art and decorations. The decorative art patterns observed in the barricades generally show a blend of diverse Sudanese cultural patterns (Adlan, 2019). This type of art, especially connected with barricades, is as dynamic as the barricades themselves. The art contents keep changing as the barricades move from one place to another.



Figure 11 Photo shows some of the art and decoration at the "Al-Simood" (boldness) Barricade northwest of the sit-in. Photo courtesy of Ali Gaffar.

Fourth, public art was used to appreciate and stimulate the country's history, and the appreciation of Sudanese identity as an alternative that transcends years of heavily promoted religious identities (Figure 12). Sudanese who made history in the past were summoned into the sit-in space through graffiti and public arts. An excellent example of this is the queen of the Nubian Kingdom of Kush, named "Kandake," who represents the active women's participation in the uprising, and the Nubian pharaoh *Taharqa* (690–664 BC), who ruled Sudan and Egypt during the twenty-fifth dynasty. The images of the "Kandake" were not only drawn but summoned through the daily practices as the protestors started to call any women participating in the uprising as a "Kandake." Finally, Similar to what happened in Tahrir square during the Arab spring, street artists also supplemented the work of many social media platforms in producing public knowledge and criticizing the regime (Main, 2014). Arts was extensively used as a social media tool and as an educational instrument to raise awareness about the protestor's cause and protestors' abilities to express their ideas through graffiti and drawing. Several art workshops and graffiti events were carried out during the fifty-eight days of the sit-in, teaching and improving protestors' abilities to produce art and express their ideas in the graphic.



Figure 12, A graffiti that exhibits the diversity of the protestors in the sit-in space. Unknown artist. Photo courtesy of Ali Gaffar.



Figure 13. Shows the outcomes of participatory art and graffiti ideas displayed in the sit-in before their transformation to the sit-in walls and floor. Photograph by Ali Gaffar.

7. Discussion

The role of public art and graffiti in the sit-in serve multiple purposes, often simultaneously: to send messages, to invoke feeling and memory, to beautify the space, to appreciate the history, to educate, to honor important persons and events, to perform as a instrument of political or social publicity, to document everyday life, and to represent a community's culture. In addition, public art in the sit-in was also an esthetic therapy. A therapy from what (Irvine, 2012, p.03) called "*dysaesthetic of urban controlled commercialized visibility*." This function may bring the public art in the Khartoum sit-in to become an act of emancipation by giving the public the space and the tools to understand the social, political, and cultural products around them (Alnaji, 2020) or by providing new ways of seeing reality.

Public art in the sit-in has also shortened the distance between the art producer (the artist) and the art consumer (the observer). It also did the same between the individual and the society (Gamman, 2019). The observer becomes a co-producer of artworks through the public participation observed in sit-in public art (Bahreldin, 2021). The sit-in has also challenged the central dominance of the neoliberal and private domain in controlling cities' visual expression, including advertisements and billboards. An excellent example of this is the transformation made by the protestors for the massive advertisement billboards in the sit-in, which turns out to be the symbolic sit-in museum that exhibits the loot claimed by the protestors along many other messages shown in Figure 6.

The sit-in public art express various challenges and issues vital for protestors. For instance, art and graffiti in the sit-in speak about history, the divide among society, justice issues, gender challenges, and environmental challenges (Adlan, 2019). Through public art, the sit-in public sphere managed to capture topics related to the revolution and the country's problems in general. Hence, public art becomes a tool for social criticism and perhaps a method to release the protestors' anger. The art and graffiti in the sit-in may have changed the notion of what art is. The revolution seems to have "liberated" art from being understood as a commodity produced and consumed by a particular group of people in exclusive art galleries; to a product produced and exhibited on the streets (Sari, 2019). Various scale art and graffiti pieces managed to stimulate the imagination and encourage people to create and explore them in perhaps the most significant open-air art exhibition and workshop in Sudan's history. The sit-in space was the ultimate space for both the production and consumption of Art. The sit-in artwork has shattered the walls of fear, taboos, and apprehension constructed during the al-Bashir regime, replacing them with these beautiful artistic alternatives, graffiti, and arts that speak of liberty and freedom. Before the revolution, "*street art and graffiti were only for the homeless; therefore, they lacked techniques. The revolution pushed the limits of public and street art by inserting both the meaning and the technique in the process*" (Afifi, 2019)). Besides, The importance of public art in the sit-in space comes not only from the look and the materials, but it is also capable of creating a sense of community through art-making. The revolution makes art production a collective endeavor through which the community participates in producing and enjoying the product. This collaborative art production is what makes art "public." We understand that urban squares are vital for employing individuals in a meaningful social hierarchy (Turner, 1970: p19). These spaces are therefore characterized as being carefully designed and planned to reflect that square's power relationships. However,

with its undefined edges and poor connectivity, the sit-in space does not belong to this category. The very forces that contributed to shaping Khartoum city urban space fragmentation gathered together to create an alternative form of public space that is produced and driven by the revolution in a way that challenged the existing mechanism. Different political parties, religious and social groups, cultural groups, and even some of those who were fighting against the government gathered in one space, protesting and producing art and graffiti that spoke of freedom.

The occupation of the sit-in space broke open courageous new spaces for Sudan artists. They, in turn, open a new arena for political discourse. This double-layered process exemplifies Albert Einstein's words, "The Revolution introduced me to art, and in turn, art introduced me to the Revolution." Street arts and graffiti in the sit-in space are thus an evocative form of placemaking, extending from pure resistance and contestation to public space beautification. Public arts in the December revolution might have challenged the traditions of the past in favour of future possibilities.

To conclude, it is crucial to acknowledge that the public art and graffiti, which unveiled the rays of public criticism and oppositional voices, are perhaps unmatched in Sudan's modern history (Bahreldin, 2020). Despite that, the authorities began to clear the artwork and graffiti after the dispersed the sit-in space. However, the socio-political fabric of Khartoum has been irreversibly marked by the contest between physical control and destruction and the remarkable stream of creative expression as manifested in public art and graffiti after the sit-in. This contest does not seem to end soon.



Figure 14. Public art after the revolution still exhibits the revolution's slogan. The photo was taken at Sudan University Tunnel in August 2019 after the sit-in. Photographed by the author.

8. Conclusions

Public art in the Khartoum sit-in was a post-occupancy critique of public spaces. The functions played by public art turned the sit-in space into the "site" and the "instrument" of the revolutionary struggle. The "site" is explained by where protestors practice their activities; the "instrument" is the tools (functions) used to express the protestor's cause regardless if that function is related to the revolution or public life.

For decades, art galleries in Khartoum have been owned, run, and exhibit the ideas of particular social and economic classes. The sit-in, perhaps temporarily, has ended years of control over art and graffiti and provided an alternative form of how public art should be produced and consumed in a public space. The question at this point is whether this alternative form of art production and its associated functions signals a paradigm shift in public art practice. Evidence of the spread of revolutionary public art and graffiti throughout Khartoum is observed. It is no longer surprising to see public walls – even those of military and administrative function – bombarded with beautiful graffiti expressing this transformation powerfully. Yet, it remains to be seen what post-uprising may offer Sudan's public spaces as the uprising is still ongoing with alternative spatiality. Even though many public spaces in Khartoum today are still spaces of expression and resistance, other spaces (especially city-level public spaces) that were used by the revolution in Khartoum regress to their original uses (including the sit-in). This echoes what was observed in the Lebanese 2019 and Tunisian 2011 uprisings (Sinno, 2020). While Sudan's December revolution beautifully showcased the importance of public arts in public spaces, this impedance has unfortunately faded over time.

Additionally, the idea of "public art" itself, as observed in the sit-in - which involved the public in the process of making the art - seems to have regressed to becoming "art in public," where art is still produced and showcased in public spaces but without the public contribution. This observation leads us to the question of who the public in public art is. Such a question is yet to be answered in the case of Khartoum public art practices. The functions of the public art exhibited in this article have provided a critique of issues beyond the revolution. Using public art to diagnose issues in the city is new to public art in Sudan. It's not massive, but a leap in the right direction.

In conclusion it's important to recall our two research questions, the role of public art and graffiti in the revolution? And how this role affects the quality of public space in the sit-in space. The findings of this article showcased five main functions that public art played during the sit-in period. Public art provided a messaging platform for protestors; it became the collective memory of the revolution; it decorated and beautified the space; it stimulated the country's history and identity; it produced human knowledge and education. Moreover, it creates a sense of community and community ownership. Also, public art has significantly changed the appearance and experience of both the sit-in space and the city of Khartoum at large, signalling a wake-up call to professionals, including city designers, social engineers, and art-makers, concerning their role in the city and society. Finally, public art demonstrated the collective work and participation in the sit-in space, confirming that public art does empower citizens. Through public art, the sit-in space has become a catalyst for social change.

References

- Abaza, M. (2014) 'Post-January Revolution Cairo: Urban Wars and the Reshaping of Public Space', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 31(8), pp. 163–183. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276414549264>.
- Adlan, H. (2019) 'Personal Communication (Telephone Interview)'.
- Afifi, A. (2019) 'Interviewed by; A. Aziz, M. and Ahlam Y. , Sabah al-Arabiya. Al-Arabiya TV [Television Broadcast] al-Arabiya'. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wsPTrxMtTA&t=2505s>.
- Agraa, O.M. et al. (1985) *Popular settlements in greater Khartoum*. 2nd editio. Khartoum: Sudanese Group for Assessment of Human Settlements.
- Ahmad, A.M. (2000) 'Khartoum blues : the “deplanning” and decline of a capital city', *Habitat International*, 24, pp. 309–325. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0197-3975\(99\)00046-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0197-3975(99)00046-6).
- Al-Karib, H. (2019) 'Interview with Washington Post'. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-women-protests/its-about-freedom-women-on-the-frontline-of-sudans-uprising-idUSKCN1PV1U2>.
- Alnaji, A. (2020) *Graffiti as Voice for Voiceless People*. Malmo University.
- Attia, S. (2011) 'Rethinking Public Space in Cairo : The Appropriated Tahrir Square', *Dialog*, 108(1), pp. 10–15.
- Awad, Z.E. (2018) 'Evaluating neighborhoods developed open spaces in khartoum-sudan', *Civil Engineering and Architecture*, 6(6), pp. 269–282. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.13189/cea.2018.060601>.
- Awad, Z.E. (2021) 'Assessing the quality of open spaces in sudanese neghoubhoods', in *Planning and Designing the Interface Between Public and Open Spaces*. Khartoum.
- Bahreldin, I.Z. (2005) *Public Space invasion and Vandalism in Khartoum*. Khartoum.
- Bahreldin, I.Z. (2020) 'Beyond the sit-in: Public space production and appropriation in sudan's december revolution, 2018', *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 12(12). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12125194>.
- Bahreldin, I.Z. (2021) *Rethinking Contemporary Public Space: The Sit-in Space Invention and Appropriation in Sudan's December Revolution 2018*, *Public Spaces, Public sphere and publicness in the Middle East*. 32. Tokyo.
- Bahreldin, I.Z. and Hamid, G.M. (2018) 'Khartoum in the eyes of the youth;an alternative vision for the city of Khartoum (in Arabic)', *Journal of Urban Reserach*, 1–2018(27), pp. 103–116.
- Bahreldin, I.Z., Suleiman, M.N. and Osman, S.M. (2014) 'Sudan', in J. Ryser and T. Franchini (eds) *The International Manual Of Planning Practice (IMPP)*. 5th edn. ISOCARP, pp. 136–144.
- Beqaj, B. (2016) 'Public Space, public interest and Challenges of Urban Transformation', *IFAC-PapersOnLine*, 49(29), pp. 320–324. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ifacol.2016.11.087>.
- Berridge, W.J. (2016) *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan; The 'Khartoum Spring'of 1964 and 1985*. 1 edition, *Middle Eastern Studies*. 1 edition. Bloomsbury Academic. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2016.1143367>.

- Carmona, M. (2015) 'Re-theorising contemporary public space: a new narrative and a new normative', *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability*, 8(4). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2014.909518>.
- El-Bushra, E.-S.E. and Hijazi, N.N.B. (1995) 'Two million squatters in Khartoum Urban Complex: The dilemma of Sudan's national capital', *GeoJournal*, 1995, pp. 505–514. Available at: <http://www.springerlink.com/index/QL4256HL40119741.pdf> (Accessed: 29 October 2010).
- Gamman, H. (2019) 'Personal Communication (Telephone interview)'.
- Gehl, J. (2007) *Public spaces for a changing public life*. Taylor & Francis. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203961827-8>.
- Gehl, J. (2010) *Cities for People*. First Edit. Island Press.
- Hafzallah, A.A. (2008) 'The Urban Development Planning of Greater Khartoum Copying with Urban Dynamics', in O.S. Osman et al. (eds) *Architects' Third Scientific Conference*. Khartoum: Sudanese Institute of Architects (SIA), pp. 33–48.
- Hamid, G.M. and Bahreldin, I.Z. (2013) 'Environmental sustainability in Greater Khartoum between natural assets and human interventions', *International Journal of Sustainable Building Technology and Urban Development*, 4(2), pp. 100–110. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2093761X.2013.801804>.
- Hamid, M. (2016) 'Rethinking the Open Spaces of Khartoum's Residential Fabric', *Architects' Fourth Scientific Conference, Khartoum, Sudan*, (May), pp. 8–9.
- Hammad, K. (2019) 'Personal Communication (Telephone interview)'.
- Harvey, D. (2009) *Social Justice and the City; (Geographies of Justice and Social Transformation)*, *Geographies of Justice and Social Transformation Ser. (Book 1)*. University of Georgia Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/213551>.
- Hou, J. (2010) '(Not) your everyday public space', in J. Hou (ed.) *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*. 1st editio. Routledge, pp. 1–18.
- Hutchison, R. and Teixeira Lopes, J. (2016) 'Urban Space and Public Places', in. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp. 3–15. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1047-004220160000015023>.
- Irvine, M. (2012) 'The Work on the Street: Street Art and Visual Culture', in Barry Sandywell and Ian Heywood (eds) *The Handbook of Visual Culture*. London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474294140.ch-010>.
- Iveson, K. (2013) 'Cities within the City: Do-It-Yourself Urbanism and the Right to the City', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37(3). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12053>.
- Jacobs, J. (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities, The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage; Reissue edition. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781912282661>.
- Kirsch, S. (1995) 'The Incredible Shrinking World? Technology and the Production of Space', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 13(5), pp. 529–555. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1068/d130529>.

- Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The production of space*. Wiley-Blackwell,. Available at: <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/The+Production+of+Space-p-9780631181774> (Accessed: 7 September 2019).
- Main, K.L. (2014) *Bombing the Tomb: Memorial Portraiture and Street Art in Revolutionary Cairo*. University of California, Berkeley. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/14272689/_Bombing_the_Tomb_Memorial_Portraiture_and_Street_Art_in_Revolutionary_Cairo (Accessed: 2 November 2019).
- Ministry of Environment, F. and U.D. and UN-Habitat (2014) *Sudan's Report for United Nations' Third Conference (Habitat III)*. Khartoum.
- Naamani, A. and Simpson, R. (2021) 'Public Space as a Venue for Peacebuilding in Lebanon? The Role of Civic Movements in Reclaiming Public Space in Beirut and Tripoli', *The Journal of Public Space*, 6(Vol. 6 n. 1), pp. 25–46. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.32891/jps.v6i1.1324>.
- Sari, A. (2019) 'Interviewed by Shababeek. al-Arabi TV [Televsison Broadcast] al-Arabi TV'.
- Sinno, W. (2020) 'How People Reclaimed Public Spaces in Beirut during the 2019 Lebanese Uprising', *The Journal of Public Space*, (Vol. 5 n. 1), pp. 193–218. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.32891/jps.v5i1.1258>.
- Turner, V. (1970) *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Cornell University Press.
- YH.AS (2020) *About the 'Good Thursday' Sudanese Await Every Week*, *Sudanow Magazine*. Available at: <https://sudanow-magazine.net/page.php?Id=1075> (Accessed: 3 November 2022).

Selflessness is the Highest Achievement. Jenny Holzer Whispering against the City Walls

Andrea Marsili

Culture Commons Quest Office, Belgium

andreamarsili30@gmail.com

Abstract

Jenny Holzer's art revolves around outspoken texts that inhabit posters and signs, namelessly disseminated through the city. The ungendered authority voice in her first written pieces, *Truisms* (1977-1987) and *Inflammatory Essays* (1978-1982), allowed her to avoid any associations with femininity as traditionally understood, fuelling passers-by's critical reflection.

Later in her career, in parallel with her efforts to establish herself on a phallogocentric art scene, Holzer's production found placement within more institutionalised museum contexts. Nonetheless, anonymity still remains a constant in Holzer's work and is thus not secondary to her outputs. Yet, most of the time, this was partially overlooked by scholars in favour of different conceptualisations of her work. Hence, this article aims to bridge this gap in the literature by analysing how Holzer adopted voices different from hers in the early stages of her career. The goal is to understand the rhetorical strategies she employed to find a place in a male-dominated art world and cityscape. By inquiring the self-fashioning of an unnamed identity, it will be remarked how the notion of persona is constantly evolving through time and space. It will be further argued that she appropriated authoritative voices far from her own, adapting them to address the public by proposing gestures of activism on topical issues of undoubted relevance, directly intervening in the public space.

Keywords: public art, feminism, Jenny Holzer, persona studies, rhetorical analysis

To cite this article:

Marsili, A. (2022) "Selflessness is the Highest Achievement: Jenny Holzer Whispering against the City Walls", *The Journal of Public Space*, 7(3). pp. 65-86. doi: 10.32891/jps.v7i3.1451

This article has been double blind peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Introduction

Jenny Holzer is one of the most loquacious artists on the international scene. Born in 1950, she grew up where “the conscience of the American psyche resides.” (Auping, 1992, p. 13), nurtured by the conservative Midwest.

After moving to New York, Holzer began experimenting with art through numerous media. Especially, in a city dotted with glowing slogans, her attachment to textuality sparked. Her production revolves, in fact, around stark, incisive texts that live on papers, posters, and signs, at first, *anonymously* disseminated through the city. Leveraging on commonplaces, language, and symbols, Holzer’s art imposes on the public space with activists’ intentions: she wants to make people uncomfortably think. Her recurring themes are *women, society, death, and war*. In a 2017 interview she explained “[...] we don’t need to work on joy. You know, that is something that takes care of itself and is sustaining but one must argue with cruelty, homicide, abuse of any sort, this I like to argue.” (Fondation Beyeler, 2017)

From feminicide to myths and social justice, her audacious approach to public art made an enormous contribution to exploring the artistic potential of activism in spreading powerful messages through the city walls.

From the very beginning, Holzer’s work has been subject to many critical reflections. Essentially, the existing literature is divided into two strands of thought: one school believes that the true matter of Jenny Holzer’s art is to be found in the content of her texts (Foster, 1982; Joselit et al., 1998; Hughes, 2006). The other is committed to arguing for the public dimension of her artistic production as a contributing element in the shaping of urban space (Siegel, 1985; Kalaidjian, 1992; Petersen, 2002; Breslin, 2013). Grounding the research on the postmodernist notion of “death of the author” (Barthes, 2001), scholars belonging to the first group expanded on the concept of the (de)constructive power of language. Foster (1982), in specific, focusing on semiotics, advanced a reflection of the “construction-by-contradiction” (ibid, p.182) in Jenny Holzer’s *œuvre*, demonstrating how conflicting points of view in her works allowed her to craft messages that are not entirely subjected to power systems. Building on this, Hughes (2006) argued that to have contradictions, a set of values and ideologies should be assumed. However, as the author claimed, any singular pre-established agenda is consistently pushed in her first series. Therefore, he dismisses “contradiction” in favour of “antagonistic positions” (ibid, p. 426), which accounts for incongruity without absolute resistance.

Another significant feature highlighted by Hughes (2006) is the strong contextual attachment in Jenny Holzer’s works. In Siegel’s (1985) analysis, context is crucial in understanding the relationship between Holzer’s artistic instances and their positioning in the art-world. As Petersen (2002) reiterated, the significance of *site-specificity* in the artist’s artworks is key. Making the case for the public exhibition *Message to the Public* (1982), she contextualised Holzer’s production as being able to animate the public discourse occupying urban space. Therefore, showing how the city is incorporated into the work of artists, not just as a physical domain, but also as a social and ideological space. Indeed, questions on anonymity and gender have been touched on by many authors (Hughes, 2006; Fox, 2007; Miazgowiec, 2010; Breslin, 2013), however, these factors have never been contextualised in a detailed analysis of Holzer’s artistic identity. Hence why, this article aims to explore in-depth the question of the evolution of the artistic

persona of Jenny Holzer, unveiling the building blocks that together allowed her to gain epistemological authority as a female artist within the urban realm.

The persona studies scholarship has recently conceptualised how identity-building results from a complex entanglement of contextual factors that comprise the truth-speaker's reliability. The notion of persona relates identity to the environment by means of performativity in different social situations (Marshall and Barbour, 2015).

Consequently, locating personae in a constant state of evolution depending on their time and space. Because the construction of identity is always discursive, especially in the case of marginalised individuals, the search for self-fashioning strategies grounds on rhetorical analysis (Wesseling, 2004). That is a reliable method to inquire about the strategies of a female artist like Jenny Holzer, who employed words as her primary medium.

Rhetorical analysis – one of the tools within the Critical Discourse Analysis framework – offers a specific regard for language, seeing it as a constructive tool with the ability to act upon the world and capable of creating subjects with power over situations. It deals with understanding the specific patterns that allow utterances to gain a certain level of persuasion over the listener (Kennedy, 2014). To this end, verbal exchanges are investigated in terms of the rationality of the argument (*logos*), emotional appeal (*pathos*) and character of the speaker (*ethos*). Here, the main focus will be on this latter aspect, emphasising the projected identities of Jenny Holzer, therefore, the different speaking voices in her production will be investigated.

With an eye on the question of Holzer's feminist claims, *standpoint theory* would substantiate the analysis. McClish and Bacon link rhetoric to feminist standpoint theory, affirming that “by emphasizing the way rhetoric that emanates from a particular perspective can unmask power relations, standpoint theory underscores the value of the work of those who are subjugated.” (2002, p. 31).

Hence, the question leading this paper is: *how did Holzer employ voices different from hers to gain authority as a female artist and activist in the public space?* Quest that is further inquired into by asking a series of sub-questions: *what was the socio-cultural context that established the basis for Holzer's socially engaged street art? How did she position herself to counteract the sexism in the art-world? And lastly, how did her art evolve in parallel with her rising recognition?*

To achieve the purpose of framing the evolution of Holzer, focusing on her female art-activist persona, – which goes beyond the scope of the sole artworks and builds upon the whole sphere of what the artist has produced and said about herself –, this article will make use of published interviews on paper and video, secondary literature, critical pieces and then go in depth into two public series: *Truisms* (1978-1987) and *Inflammatory Essays* (1978-1982). These two series represent the first written projects in which the artist is the only author of the texts. As she mentioned, in fact, once she gained public recognition as a (female) artist Holzer “stopped writing with gratitude” (The Modern, 2012) as she felt the need to use her platform to give recognition to other silenced voices who have not been as fortunate. Additionally, these pieces present different narratives and formats that correlate to Holzer's artistic and personal evolutions that are to be discussed in this paper.



Figure 1. Jenny Holzer at the Manifesto Show, with Colen Fitzgibbon and Collab Projects, 1979
© Art Resource, NY / Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

USE WHAT IS DOMINANT IN A CULTURE TO CHANGE IT QUICKLY (The Survival Series, 1983-1985)

New York, street art and social reclamation movements

While until the 1960s the ways of living and building the city have been in a functionalist direction, since the second half of the 1970s, generations of independent thinkers, young creatives and rising artists have pushed to transform urban contexts into attractive social containers. New York represents a prime example. During the late 1970s, the city endured a prolonged economic recession. Several jobs got lost as well as a large portion of its population. Generalised social difficulties meant for many owners the impossibility to pay for repairs or property taxes. This caused tremendous disinvestments in renewing buildings, which resulted in particularly tough criticalities especially in high-density lower-income areas such as Manhattan's Lower East Village. Historically, the Lower East Side was a safe place for migrants and city newcomers during the XIX and XX centuries. However, after 1975 – when the municipality barely escaped bankruptcy – the Big Apple's institutions were unable to provide for the maintenance expenses of the district and ensure sufficient assistance for affordable housing (LPC, 2012).



Figure 2. Vergara, Camilo J., Lower East Side, 1970
© Library of Congress Archive <https://www.loc.gov/item/2020701645/>

Inspired by social reclamation movements, some residents and community organisations began to rehabilitate the buildings through grassroots, legal and illegal, initiatives. This vibrancy attracted a wave of young artists that migrated from all over America to the lively neighbourhoods of the Lower East Side. Thus, it became a highly multicultural area where social differences were celebrated for their reconstructive potential. The area was:

“a unique mix of Puerto Rican, Dominican, African-American, Chinese, Ukrainian, Polish, Italian and Jewish Americans as well as aging hippies, left-over punks, recent skinheads, old left and new left radicals, housing activists, squatters, small businesses, winos, junkies, cops, and the Hells Angels Motorcycle Gang.” (Scholette 1998, p. 52).



Figure 3. Vergara, Camilo J., Lower East Side, 1970
© Library of Congress Archive <https://www.loc.gov/item/2018645218/>

Within this constellation of communities, the possibility of complex socio-political contestations was more than likely to be raised, and, for sure, it included a vast selection of voices. The high concentration of creatives brought these debates to the walls. *Street art* – or more broadly *public art* – affirmed as a true frontier art. *Street art* defines a type of spontaneous creative expression. It rejects the intermediation of the art system and proposes a new contact with the public. Public art-activists side with and voice the oppressed ones, straightforwardly displaying significant instances to the faces of passers-by. Their aim was to tie the knots between the morality of the glossy consumer culture and the fringes of a society that experienced daily social and racial marginalisation. For this very reason, they usually took action in spaces and places where they knew their words and embellishments would have caused disarray, whether in agreement or disdain.



Figure 4. Vergara, Camilo J., Lower East Side, 1977
© Library of Congress Archive, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2020697401/>

Riding on this wave, forms of mural social engagement were ever-so present in the 1970s USA: from women's liberation to racial inequalities, anti-war activism, and sexual and reproductive rights. The social turmoil already underway provided a basis for public reclamations that only intensified after Reagan's inauguration in 1981. This was the context in which Jenny Holzer first came to New York. Here, she came into contact with trending social and political theories, while living in the city of signs, billboards, and advertisements. However, New York City's mythology was far from as polished as one might think. Holzer recalls:

“When I lived there, it was a very, very different SoHo. It was rough. Creeping into the 80s, when Reagan came in, and the numbers of homeless people escalated — I was living on the Lower East Side by then — there were families, mothers and little kids, sleeping on benches in the subways. Not nice. Hideous. Winter. Bundled-up kids on the subway platform. The art world was relatively clean then,

though, because there was little to no money to be made. Minimalism hadn't been all that expensive, or successful in the market. Many younger artists didn't think about selling their stuff, or developing a brand. It was a paradise in that it was about the work; it was about the content; it was about striving to give. There's a reason to be nostalgic for that. The artists in Colab [a street artist collective] were trying to find content that could be meaningful to almost anybody walking down the street, and that might actually address a few things.” (Farago, 2016)

The state of difficulties, inequalities, and uncertainty was worsening. These new instances of protest and mural activism were absorbed by the artist as she publicly staged her first staple pieces of engaged, personal, and wordy street art. Holzer's first series, *Truisms* and *Inflammatory Essays*, were an artist's theoretically and socially informed synthesis of the public demands brought up at the time: power systems, homelessness, social equality, and women's rights.

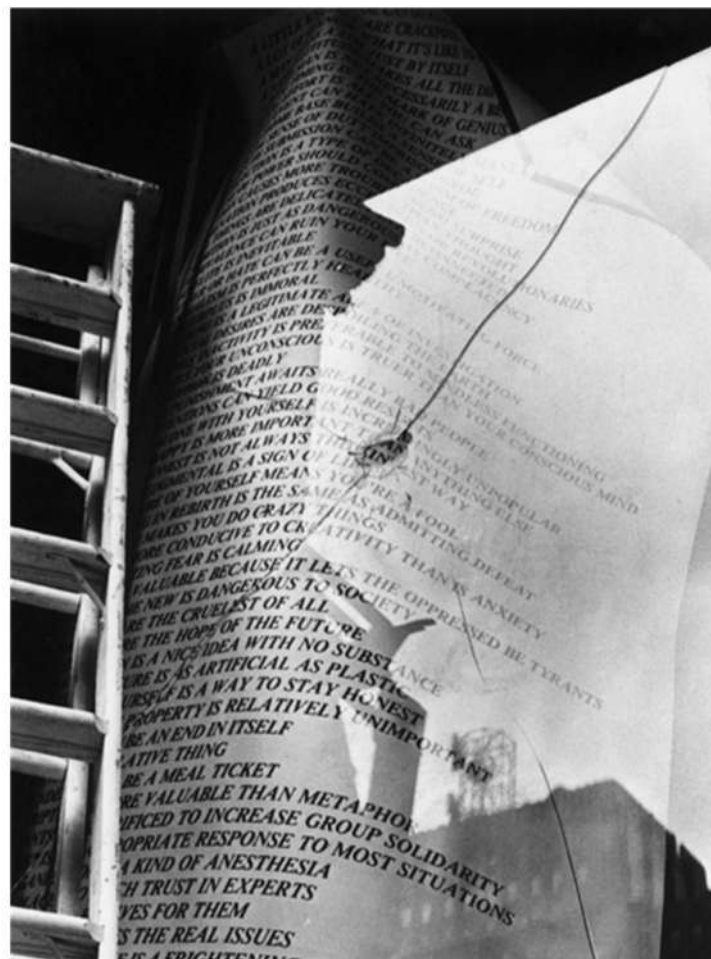


Figure 5. From *Truisms* (1977–1978), NY, 1978.
 © Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Working with topical and newsworthy themes, Holzer always made sure these instances were publicly available to the most finger-pointing people. She posted her posters in heavily trafficked streets poignantly describing issues that were far from the blue-collar audiences they were intended for. Jenny Holzer's aim was, in fact, to instil some sort of spark to take action, despite the fact that she acknowledged all too well their unwillingness to accept change as they were themselves contributing to the creation of the problem (The Modern, 2012).

WORDS TEND TO BE INADEQUATE (Truisms, 1978-1987)

The use of language in the art world

As mentioned, when it comes to identifying the privileged medium of Jenny Holzer's art, *writing* is central in all her production.

The social and intellectual conditions for carving a niche for inflamed writings as art pieces were already forming, and the public debate in the early 1980s was very much alive. For about a decade, the new school of *conceptual art*, led by male personalities such as *Kosuth* and *Broodthaers*, had been gaining ground. Conceptualists dematerialised traditional artistic media by believing in the standalone power of concepts. New art materials became pamphlets, posters, and reflections on everyday life and the art system (Millet, 1972). Not typical museum pieces but tokens drenched with meanings, intended to expose the contradictions of art and society. Language became, thus, a powerful tool, resorted as one of the key sites “where ideology is replicated in the subject, or rather, where language as ideology creates the subject.” (Holzer et al., 2008, p. 119).



Figure 6. Joseph Kosuth, One and Three Chairs, 1965

© 2021 Joseph Kosuth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, NY <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81435>

CONFUSING YOURSELF IS A WAY TO STAY HONEST (Truisms, 1977-1987) **Truisms and the rhetorical power of a street poster**

1980s New York was not lacking in subjects or clashing ideologies to draw from. The social vibrancy of the avant-garde city offered Holzer many conceptual cues that became staples throughout her artistic career. In the first public series, *Truisms*, the artist's voice explored minimal forms of linguistic exchanges to put forward reflections on the role of beliefs in society.

“I was in my twenties, trying to figure out what I believed in, and I was trying to understand more about how people might govern when there are so many opinions in the world. *What do you do to have society cooperate rather than go to war?*” (Fundación BBVA, 2012).

Truisms helped Holzer fight her way out of the wilderness. The series consists of a list of sentences written in all caps, bold, and italicised that claim to be self-evident truths. These provocative short-phrases found their place on posters, pasted outside on the bustling streets of a densely populated SoHo, where people expected to see yet another billboard but instead were faced with a tangle of thoughts. Indeed, what was important to Jenny Holzer was to find a space for herself in the city. But above all, what she strived for was the recognition of the problems she was facing citizens with. SoHo has always been an important neighbourhood close to the Lower East Side. A neighbourhood where diverse people were exchanging life experiences and ambitions. However, the rising population of artists was just inadvertently laying the foundations for the redevelopment of the neighbourhood. Although a new identity for SoHo, which had always been a difficult and working-class district, initially benefited the residents, on the other hand it catalysed a process of gentrification (Lasner, 2017). Indeed, young entrepreneurs, especially in the arts, became attracted to the creative neighbourhood and began to settle in the already overcrowded buildings as well as started to build new ones. Thus, they quickly replaced the neighbourhood's population with more affluent residents, leaving displaced as a consequence the less fortunate (artists included) who settled there for the benefits of the vicinity network and cheap rents (Sutton, 2020). This very noticeable increase in homelessness among her peers and the resulting social problems were good enough reasons for Holzer to take action and try to push an agenda with a greater sensitivity towards her fellow humans in mind. She started with literature, distilling concepts from a “prodigiously long reading list” (The Modern, 2012). She scrutinised the most influential political theory, feminism, post-structural philosophy and social studies accounts, from which she grasped short utterances coming from a polyphony of voices and points of view. Those *truisms* took the form of newly pronounced clichés, challenging maxims that spoke for themselves. She articulated:

“I knew the Truisms weren't poetry, so they shouldn't go into a little book, and I knew they weren't a novel, so they didn't go in a big book. I had to think of a form that was appropriate for them. After I, half-way, became convinced that they were legitimate, I realised that they had to go outside. They were useless as a list on a desk.” (Auping, 1992, p. 78).

As part of a growing group of young and mainly female street art-activists (honourable mentions include Lady Pink, the collective Guerrilla Girls and Barbra Kruger), the focus was to convey contents and hard truths about social inequalities to the general public by directly intervening in the public space. Thus, the relatively inexpensive posters seemed to Holzer to be the way forward to reach her twofold objective: firstly, confront and take up time and space in the public life of private citizens; secondly, be brave and declare in no uncertain terms “what a room full of people might be thinking if they were honest about what they were thinking.” (The Modern, 2012).

Truisms were thrown towards the audience in public, which in response reacted more or less receptively to the messages. What Holzer was looking for at this moment was indeed the frankness that only being on the street can give you. In fact, with Truisms she strived to create devices that could confront people, hoping for a reaction. She recalls many who “check(ed) the ones they liked and appreciated” and others who “finally dismiss(ed) the entire enterprise as unmentionable” (The Modern, 2012).

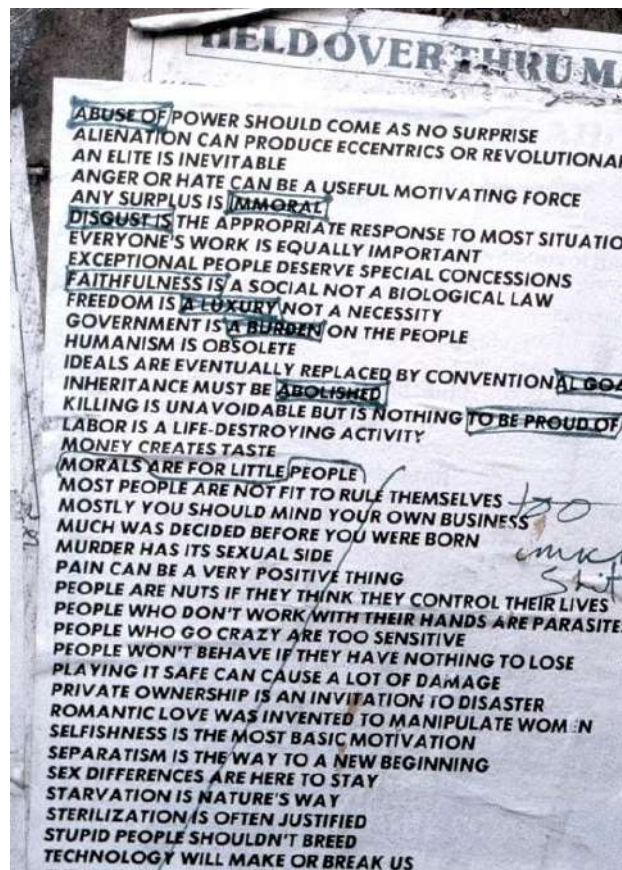


Figure 7. From Truisms (1977-1987)
© 1977 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

This success, the fact that it moved and had a persuasive and time-honoured hold on people, is most likely due to Holzer’s carefully crafted rhetorical operation. The rhetorical intention of the *Truisms*, however, was fairly ambitious. The artist wanted to urge, instruct, provoke and emotion – or whichever combination of those. *Truisms*

conveyed different and sometimes contrasting ideas or feelings about human behaviour, presented simultaneously, in the same physical and ideological frame.

Dealing with a multitude of beliefs and issues, any visual or conceptual hierarchies were created. She arranged the statements in alphabetical order, resulting in casual concatenations of multifaceted socio-political thoughts. Their plainness and tidiness in style did not necessarily differentiate them that much from classical posters or pieces of written communication in the urban space. Nevertheless, each of these elements contributes to enhancing their symbolic and rhetorical value.

Jenny Holzer's persuasive aim was to feed the public discourse. She wanted to present a cascade of views to a fast-moving stream of people with a short attention span. Hence, the rhetorical power of one-liners on a poster was unmatched.

The combination of content and medium allowed Holzer to propose reflections on commonplaces and institutions in an authoritative voice, by directly taking over the public space. The unexpected presence of these statements "asked viewers to draw their own connections between idea, speech, written text and action through a variety of lenses: personal, historical, or social." (Fox 2007, p. 39). To reach this goal, Holzer's words needed to be logical, simple and understandable. After all, her intention was to activate people with her art in the public space, therefore, she needed to level out the cognitive distance between the art-world's intellectual vanities and the common viewers. When asked about the nature of her words, Jenny Holzer likes to mention her regional provenance:

"I think being a Midwesterner had something to do with my choice of language and my choice of particular type of language. When Midwesterners are moved to speak, they speak very plainly and very succinctly. What is, maybe, not very Midwesterner about my whole enterprise is that a lot of times people from the *Heartland* are prone to keep things to themselves. They don't buff about things. Maybe, what's a reaction against my Midwesterner upbringing is to bring unmentionable things to the public's eye." (Holzer and Müller, 2010)

At the logos level, Truisms are a series of simple-structured complete phrases in a declarative voice, that sounds like folklore. Readers find themselves confronted with pronouncements that allegedly know more, are worth more and command more than what the busy walker could have ever expected. Emotionally, however, this very commanding, anti-narrative component of the language deliberately intrigues and stimulates the psyche of passers-by. The care in the writing process aimed to produce the most complex rhetorical stunts. She crafted the language to appear as something already known and established over time, relying on *repetitions*, *antithesis*, *half-quotations* and *commonplaces*.

A *LITTLE KNOWLEDGE CAN GO A LONG WAY* is a clear example of Holzer's language manoeuvring. In many posters, this is the first *Truism* one might encounter. Holzer took inspiration from the renowned *maxims* "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing" or "a little money can go a long way" and put her spin on it by inverting its meaning, setting the critical tone and inquisitive attitude in the reader. Among the same lines, *MONEY CREATES TASTE* is a renewed rendition of the sayings "money can't buy taste"; or "there's

no disputing taste”. Again, the reader feels familiar, yet sceptical about this new revisitiation of those dogmatic postulates.

In carrying out this operation, Jenny Holzer’s persona shines through as austere and detached. The artist, in fact, always sought to maintain some distance between herself and her audience. “I try to polish them, so they sound as if they had been said for a hundred years, but they’re mine... to write a quality cliché you have to come up with something new.” (Siegel 1985, p. 65). This denial of Holzer’s own personality for the sake of omniscience demarks an attempt to broaden the scope of her claims from the specific to the general. Indeed, she agreed with numerous truisms, but at the same time Holzer did not argue further, leaving the space for the viewer to decide whether to stand up for the common good, get angry, or simply let it go.

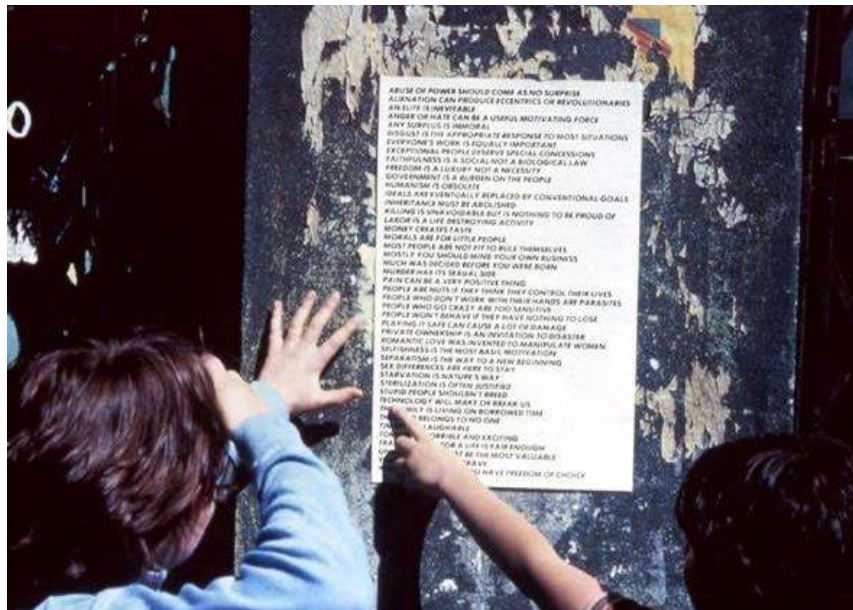


Figure 8. From Truisms (1977-1987)
© 1979 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

For this reason, she can deliberately contrast an optimistic *CHILDREN ARE THE HOPE OF THE FUTURE* with a far darker *IT IS A GIFT TO THE WORLD NOT TO HAVE BABIES* offering a complete *antithesis* on the same topic. The same is true for *USING FORCE TO STOP FORCE IS ABSURD* and *VIOLENCE IS PERMISSIBLE EVEN DESIRABLE OCCASIONALLY* which are alphabetically subsequent.

Holzer provokes people with contradictory views on fundamental and contemporary human themes, forcing viewers to reconsider their response, helping them deal with disaster, fear, and change in the world.

The omniscience of the compositions allowed the artist to enact the persona of the master behind the enterprise, never the individual-(wo)man but always the every-man. As Foster (1982) underlined “in a variety of signs she presents opinions, credos, anecdotes in a way which both manifests the domination active in everyday discourse and confounds it by sheer anarchic display” (p. 107). She twists and turns this ideal western collective wisdom intending to bombard the reader with different one-liners that interact with each other, more or less intentionally – and this allowed her to

project in the public space identities, ideologies and voices from all over the place. Because in the end, *YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR CONSTITUTING THE MEANING OF THINGS* (*Truisms*, 1977-1987).

CHANGE IS THE BASIS OF ALL HISTORY (Inflammatory Essays, 1978-1982) **Raging arguments to change the world**

With *Truisms*, Jenny Holzer created the standard for her productions to follow. The seminal contents and public connotation of her work had been established. Although she already touched upon several recurring topics – politics, religion, feminism, morals, society and sexuality – a more structured conceptual maturity came to be in *Inflammatory Essays*.

“I remember that I thought the tone of the *Truisms* was possibly too even, too bland, too balanced. I wanted less balance, and I wanted the next writing to flame...I wanted a passionate statement about the way the world could be if people did things right...I went to the library to find examples of lunatic manifestos and beautiful ones.”

(Waldman 1989, p. 16)

Expanding the process of clichés-building inaugurated with the previous work, in *Essays*, Holzer presented more articulated arguments and provocations. The *Truisms* had such a hold on the audience because everyone could find at least one sentence with which they could agree among the cacophony of messages on the posters. However, still not many things were changing in society. Once she realised that *Truisms* were hitting some spots but not the right ones, she decided to venture further into the city, artistically occupying business neighbourhoods and tourist meeting points. She used posters, but this time the writing standard was different and more substantial. Each *affiche* hosted hundred-word long arguments, separated into twenty lines of text. Here, the persuasiveness was enhanced not only by the paragraph format – which creates bridges between fragments – but also by the introduction of colours in the papers.

Despite maintaining the same rationality of the argumentation of the previous series, the *Essays* became more enraged in their topics and tones. Hence, the rhetorical aspects of those visual arguments had to be more outstanding. In detangling their complexity, the presence of figures of speech is not irrelevant.

The piece in *Figure 9* starts with a commanding repetition of “*don’t*”. This produces a figure of speech defined as *anaphora*, when the first part of a phrase is repeated through the same paragraph. The effects evoked by this rhetorical device are manifold: a series of orders that create an authority figure that opposes another subject. Presumably, Holzer speaks for women and the difficulty they have in being heard in society. Having more space to convey her point, the pathos of the paragraphs is in fact much more emphasised than in the previous series. Continuing the analysis, here, through the vindictiveness of the *climax* culminating in a *rhetorical question*, the artist reiterates the question of an unknown person (*man*) that has the power to take over others (*women*), unless they recognise the other’s oppressed identity. They are just waiting for the proper time to counteract. The question of time (“*biding my time*”, “*almost over*”) reinforces through sayings the idea of the approaching of the maximum point of tolerance for the speaking subject.

*DON'T TALK DOWN TO ME. DON'T
BE POLITE TO ME. DON'T
TRY TO MAKE ME FEEL NICE.
DON'T RELAX. I'LL CUT THE
SMILE OFF YOUR FACE. YOU
THINK I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S
GOING ON. YOU THINK I'M
AFRAID TO REACT. THE JOKE'S
ON YOU. I'M BIDDING MY TIME,
LOOKING FOR THE SPOT. YOU
THINK NO ONE CAN REACH YOU,
NO ONE CAN HAVE WHAT YOU
HAVE. I'VE BEEN PLANNING
WHILE YOU'RE PLAYING. I'VE
BEEN SAVING WHILE YOU'RE
SPENDING. THE GAME IS
ALMOST OVER SO IT'S
TIME YOU ACKNOWLEDGE ME.
DO YOU WANT TO FALL NOT
EVER KNOWING WHO TOOK YOU?*

Figure 9. From *Inflammatory Essays* (1978-1982)
© 1977 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

*MONDAY, SOMEONE DIED BECAUSE
HE HURT ME SO I CUT HIM
WITHOUT THINKING. TUESDAY,
SOME ANIMAL DIED BECAUSE HE
WAS TOO DANGEROUS TO BE FREE.
WEDNESDAY, A THIEF DIED SO
EVERYONE WILL KNOW TO RESPECT
PRIVATE PROPERTY. THURSDAY,
SOME POLITICO DIED BECAUSE
HIS IDEAS WERE CRAZY AND
TOO CONTAGIOUS. FRIDAY, SOME
RAPIST DIED BECAUSE HE LEFT
HIS VICTIM WISHING SHE WAS
DEAD. HE HAD TO DIE WISHING HE
WAS ALIVE. SATURDAY, I KILLED
A CONDEMNED MAN SO NO ONE ELSE
WOULD GET BLOOD ON THEIR HANDS.
SUNDAY, I RESTED. MONDAY,
SIX PEOPLE JUMPED ME SO I
CUT THEM WITHOUT THINKING.*

Figure 10. From *Inflammatory Essays* (1978-1982)
© 1979 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

A similar idea of temporality is biblically (“SUNDAY, I RESTED” can be read as hinting at the seventh day of rest in Genesis 2:2-3) expressed in this *Essay* (Figure 10). In a parabolic fashion, the artist presents some real events that might have happened to Holzer or that, with a certain saddening recurrency, she actively witnessed. With a multiplication of the ones that are characterised as *evils* that must be “*cut off without thinking*” the first and last sentences act as a *frame* in which the history develops during the week.

Even if the short *Essay* does not give us enough descriptive information to visualise the violent and the victim, again we can identify a *he* and a *she* involved. The point of tension in the text coincides with the central part, highlighted by a *contrarium* with the same structure but an inversion of subjects (“*wishing she was dead*”/ “*wishing he was alive*”). This rhetorical device creates distance between the reader and the scene and underlines even better the denunciation tone of the piece, reinforcing the idea that *she* had it worse.

Furthermore, the whole essay presents a series of *synecdoche* – when the name of a part is used to refer to the whole or vice versa – aimed to target different social categories. The *thief*, contextually, might allude to all the people living in challenging conditions that need to transgress the law to survive. The *politico* with the use of *irony* mocks (and at the same time sides with) the activists who constantly strive to be heard. Crucially, as the resilient protagonist *I*, Holzer’s rhetorical operations always aimed to go against systems of power – might it be *governmental*, *male power* or *language power*.

SEX DIFFERENCES ARE HERE TO STAY (Truisms, 1977-1987)

Women in the ‘80s art world

Remarkably, the lack of signature (*ellipsis*) in her posters is also rhetorically significant to enquire about her character and persona. It makes people question themselves, *who is giving me orders? Who pronounced this? Is it a he or a she?* It has never been the desire of the artist to declare her presence in public space. She is there, but nobody knows her. “I wouldn’t want to be isolated as a woman’s voice,” the artist said in 1986, “because I’ve found that when things are categorised, they tend to be dismissed.” (Ferguson, p. 114). Arguably, anonymity could also be related to the state of the law under which Holzer operated. New Yorkers’ institutions, in fact, were fighting to prohibit the increasingly rampant expressions of public art, seen as litter for the town and responsible for the devaluation of buildings. (LPC, 2012; Schwartzman, 1985). Yet, Jenny Holzer’s activist soul could not care less about the state orders, her mission was, in fact, to point out the shortfalls of this very system. *YOU MUST DISAGREE WITH AUTHORITY FIGURES*, one Truism commandingly recites. But subverting laws was not the only reason for her namelessness.

During a lecture for The Modern Museum of Fort Worth, she declared, “I thought: of course, I’m not an artist! How could I be an artist? What is art anyway? I’m from the Midwest. I came from some practical people! Art, anyway, was Picasso with his babes.” (The Modern, 2012). This statement reflects one fundamental facet of Holzer’s persona and a very common thought in the 1980s art world. On the one hand, her upbringing taught her to be practical, to get her point across simply and pervasively. Although the path she decided to follow was in the arts, “almost an anti-career move” (Auping 1992, p. 70), at the same time, she cared and valued the influence of creativity in challenging

established and unequal social hierarchies. She had, however, to confront another obstacle. In the eighties, the widespread idea was that *the artist* needed to be male (“Picasso”), and that *he* needed to be exuberant and publicly brag about his position (“with his babes”). Holzer did not conform to this, nor was she interested in it. Nevertheless, women artists wanted their role in society and their claims to be heard. As mentioned, Holzer crossed paths with several feminist artists and collectives that firmly declared their validity in the art world. Notably, the sensibility regarding social topics in those years was very rich and lively among female artists and collectives. Names started to appear, but yet amid those flamboyant years “Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female” as fellow activist and artist Guerrilla girls in their infamous *Naked billboard* (Figure 11) stated. Emphasising the notion that women were still seen as objects, and not as subjects capable of putting forward social and artistic criticism such as to be included in institutional collections.



Figure 11. Guerrilla Girls, Naked billboard, 1989
© 1985-2020 Guerrilla Girls / <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/naked-through-the-ages>

IT IS MAN'S FATE TO OUTSMART HIMSELF (Truisms, 1978-1987)

Anonymity, female authority and subversion

How did she manage to position herself as recognisable among other quieted women, then? Being the message carrier between the different opinions that floated around the public space, Holzer can be defined as a disembodied enraged mediator. She wanted to pass on urgent insights before being considered an artist. Choosing namelessness was thus a gesture to emphasise her identity as a thinking subject capable of pronouncing strong words; words that society would never attribute to a woman.

“It was anonymous partly because I was, as a person and as an artist. I thought of myself as essentially anonymous, and I didn’t sign because I wanted people to concentrate on the content [...] Of course, there’s the woman thing. I didn’t want the work to be rejected out of hand by people who’d know it was by a young woman, people who would filter

out the content for that reason, operating on immediate assumptions.”
(Kennedy, 2019)

In a world of art traditionally dominated by men, Jenny Holzer decided to adopt their tones and behave like what was considered the prototype of *the artist*. Deconstructing the characteristic dominant voice, she arrogates authority to herself. As Kelly (1998) remarked “because of this coincidence of language and patriarchy, the feminine is metaphorically, set on the side of the heterogenous, the unnameable, the unsaid.” (p. 23). The spirit of protest of Jenny Holzer could not accept this risk. Anonymity out of fear of not being heard or worse, of not being taken seriously. “It’s funny. Somebody asked me if the reason I was selected for the Venice Biennale was that I am a woman, but a woman who acts like a man and does art like a man. I was taken aback.” (Auping 1992, p. 79). As observed by Ryan et al. (2016), in a patriarchal society “it is culturally and socially restrictive for women to develop an authoritative *ethē*” (p. 2). Since her *Truisms* and *Essays* were impossible to trace back to a distinguished author, as argued by Hughes, they were automatically attributed to a male speaking voice.



Figure 12. Jenny Holzer at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1989.
© 1989 Marianne Barcellona / Getty Images

Historically women, in fact, were defined as being “formless, ungrounded, irrational, devoid of shape, clarity, truth.” (Hughes 2006, p. 438). By refusing those values she plays with social hierarchies. She reacted against the binary system – in which male voices are commonly linked with rationality – and subverted it. Holzer created a *verfremdungseffect* that alienates the reader, who becomes unable to identify the source of knowledge and is driven to critical reflection.

However, although she does not project a feminine voice – as commonly being referred to as *modesty, politeness, emotionality and submissiveness* – she always situates herself as a female speaker. On multiple occasions, Holzer reiterated “I do want my voice to be heard and, yes, it’s a woman’s voice” (Ferguson 1986, p. 45). This acknowledgment in

anonymity of the feminine situatedness of her vision (Haraway 1988) granted her authority in the public realm.

As a result, all of Holzer's early work in the city space should not be viewed as a mere attempt by a marginalised individual to reclaim her rights, but rather, to borrow Haraway's words, Jenny Holzer

“...seek not the knowledges ruled by phallogocentrism (nostalgia for the presence of the one true Word) and disembodied vision. [She] We seek those ruled by partial sight and limited voice – *not partiality for its own sake but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible*. Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular.” (1988, p. 590)

The artist intercedes for the marginal position she is speaking from. She namelessly reclaims the space in the city for all the disregarded or muted identities that inhabit it. Holzer's art engages in a fight, a fight that is not only specific to her but first and foremost to all women, marginalised groups, in her time and place. (Hughes, 2006). Winning this battle comes at the expense of her authorship, her singular voice. We only grasp it by listening closely in between the lines of her posters as the “source of all this noise.” (ibid, p. 440).



Figure 13. Messages to the Public, NY, 1982 – From Truisms (1977-1987)
© 1982 John Marchael.

<https://www.publicartfund.org/exhibitions/view/messages-to-the-public-holzer/>

KNOWING YOURSELF LETS YOU UNDERSTAND OTHERS (Truisms, 1978-1987)

By the end of the '80s, her self-fashioning strategy as man-acting-female-thinking proved to be fruitful. As her reputation grew, she became the first American woman to have an entire pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1990.

She recalls "I absolutely didn't want to do a bad show because I was afraid that people would take that as an excuse to dismiss women's art. [...] I also found it difficult to be an official American representative. Most of my art until that point had been anonymous and that has given me the liberty and the freedom to do anything I wanted. I was shocked when I came indoors and did shows because people knew who did it." (Holzer and Müller, 2010)

Coming indoors meant for Holzer to acknowledge her female identity, as an artist and individual, for the first time in her career. What had always scared her the most was being overlooked. She did not want the things she most valued to be disregarded because they were pronounced by a woman.

The aim of this article was to uncover how she succeeded in avoiding it during the early stages of her career. To unveil, how she manoeuvred words and visuals rhetorically to counteract and grant herself a spot among a plethora of male artists acting in the public space. What has been shown is that through her work, she "appropriated, adapted, and generated new *ethē* to speak to and within patriarchal publics." (Ryan et al. 2016, p. 4), until, through anonymity, she found herself and her authority. Her particular view on authorship and self-worth allowed her to collapse the values of truth, identity, morality and ideology. She assumed the authority attributed to men to present in the public space the persona of a socially engaged feminist.

By lending the voice of authority to echo feminist and social issues, she repurposed the tools of power, changing the rules of the game. In this sense, as various feminist standpoint theorists made clear, she gave a voice to every woman and targeted individual, as the recognition of the ethos of an oppressed identity inevitably comes in relationship with others (Ryan et al., 2016).

Holzer imposed herself on the scene by quietly affirming the loud power of language by way of selection, context and presentation. She hijacked a tone foreign to her and appropriated it. Bringing up heated topics, and speaking people's minds on the city walls, she became one of the most recognised female public artists among a generation of artsy-activists.

Playing on the contradiction between authoritative tones and sensitive topics, she built herself a persona that can be trusted and listened to. Adding an extra degree of complexity to her artworks, away from the purely visual, she challenged the ultra-masculine tradition of public speaking. Subverting the traditional norms of power, she manipulated and repurposed voices to gain recognition and credibility. As a result, her art, which straddles the political and the personal, has forever altered our understanding of truth, which is never one and undeniable but always multiple and circumstantial.

The accessibility of her language, always in search of a public response, gave her the best platform to voice her positions and to expand her artistic practice in the cityscape.

Holzer was able to strategically locate herself as a predominant voice in the very place where the events she was dealing with were taking place. Thus, materialising the public dimension of the ideological battles that were going on in those years. Furthermore, the placement of her artworks where is the least expected allowed her to create forms of

control in spaces in which they often go unnoticed. By exposing the linguistic influence in everything that surrounds us, Jenny Holzer succeeded in creating private systems of subversive knowledge that live in the public space, and through which polyphonic representations are granted.

Jenny Holzer represents an artist who came to maturity in a troubled time when democracies were endangered and people reluctant to act. Her art became a medium of a new form of trust in people, of which she embodies the protectress. So that she could disappear behind her artworks, again.

Reference

- Auping, M. (1992) *Jenny Holzer*: New York: Universe
- Barthes, R. (1979) *Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology*. Collège de France, October 8
- Barthes, R. (2001) 'The death of the author'. *Contributions in Philosophy* 83, pp. 3-8.
- Breslin, D. C. (2013) *I Want to Go to the Future Please: Jenny Holzer and the End of a Century* [Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University].
- Brooks, A. (2007) 'Feminist standpoint epistemology: Building knowledge and empowerment through women's lived experience.' *Feminist research practice*, pp. 53-82.
- Farago, J. (2016) *An interview with Jenny Holzer*, Even, Issue 5 [online] available from <<http://evenmagazine.com/jenny-holzer/>> [May 2021]
- Ferguson, B. (1986) 'Wordsmith: an interview with Jenny Holzer'. *Art in America* 74(12), pp. 108-15.
- Fondation Beyeler, (2017) *Jenny Holzer: Interview*. [Video file] available from <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaY8VmHmiB4>> [April 2021]
- Fortini, A. (2018) *Jenny Holzer Made Good Things Out of Horror*. The Cut. [online] available from <<https://www.thecut.com/2018/10/women-and-power-jenny-holzer.html>> [April 2021]
- Foster, H. (1982) *Subversive signs*. In *Recordings. Art, Spectacle and Cultural Politics*. Bay Press.
- Fox, P. H. (2007) *Textual Apparitions: Power, Language, and Site in the Work of Jenny Holzer*. [online] available from <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=pomona_theses> [April 2021]
- Fundación BBVA, (2012) *Jenny Holzer. Lo indescriptible*. [Video file] [online] available from <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70VaBkQE9jw&t=420s>> [May 2021]
- Gee, J. P. (1999) *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: theory and method*. London: Routledge.
- Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective'. *Feminist Studies* 14(3), pp. 575-599.
- Holzer, J., Breslin, D. (Ed.) (2008) *An Interview with Jenny Holzer – in Jenny Holzer and Benjamin Buchloh, Jenny Holzer*. Hatje Cantz, pp. 117-125

- Holzer, J., Müller, C. (2010) *About Jenny Holzer*, [Video file] [online] available from <<https://cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/play/51396/About-Jenny-Holzer>>
- Hughes, G. (2006) 'Power's Script: or, Jenny Holzer's Art after 'Art after Philosophy''. *Oxford art journal* 29(3), pp. 419-440.
- Joselit, D. (Ed.), Holzer, J., Simon, J., and Saleci, R. (1998) *Jenny Holzer*. Phaidon
- Kalaidjian, W. B. (1992) 'Mainlining Postmodernism: Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and the Art of Intervention'. *Postmodern Culture* 2(3).
- Kelly, M. (1998) *Imagining Desire*. MIT press.
- Kennedy, G. A. (2014) *New Testament interpretation through rhetorical criticism*. UNC Press Books.
- Kennedy, R., (2019) 'I Can See Empty Space as a Three-Dimensional Solid': Artist Jenny Holzer on How She Fuses Architecture with Language'. *Artnet*. [online] available from <<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/jenny-holzer-interview-randy-kennedy-1558357>> [April 2021]
- Lasner, M.G., (2017). *The Lofts of SoHo: Gentrification, Art, and Industry in New York, 1950–1980*. *Journal of American History*, 104(1), pp.281-282.
- LPC. Landmarks Preservation Commission. (2012) *East Village/Lower East Side Historic District Designation Report*. New York [online] available from <<http://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/lpc/lp/2491.pdf>> [May 2021]
- Marshall, P. D., and Barbour, K. (2015) 'Making Intellectual Room for Persona Studies: A New Consciousness and a Shifted Perspective'. *Persona Studies* 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.21153/ps2015vol1no1art464>
- McClish, G., and Bacon, J. (2002) "'Telling the story her own way": The role of feminist standpoint theory in rhetorical studies.' *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 32(2), pp. 27-55.
- Miazgowicz, B. (2010) "You Are Responsible for Constituting the Meaning of Things:" *Examining Jenny Holzer's Progressively Complex Textual Constructs* [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Miami]
- Millet, C. (1972) *Textes sur l'art conceptuel*. Ed. Daniel Templon.
- Newest York, (2018) *In conversation: Jenny Holzer + Lili Holzer-Glier*, [online] available from <<http://www.newestnyork.co/18-holzer-in-conversation>> [April 2021]

- Petersen, A. R. (2002) 'Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger at Time Square'. In *The Urban Lifeworld: Formation Perception Representation*, edited by P. Madsen, R. Plunz, and R. Thomas, Taylor & Francis, pp. 366-384.
- Phaidon (2017) *Jenny Holzer talks about her NYC AIDS Memorial.*, Phaidon. [online] available from <<https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2017/november/21/jenny-holzer-talks-about-her-nyc-aids-memorial/>> [April 2021]
- Ryan, K. J., Myers, N., and Jones, R. (2016) 'Introduction: Identifying feminist ecological ethe'. In *Rethinking ethos: A feminist ecological approach to rhetoric*, pp. 1-22.
- Schwartzman, A. (1985) *Street art*. Doubleday.
- Sholette, G., (1998) 'News from nowhere: Activist art and after'. *Third Text* 13(45), pp. 45-62.
- Siegel, J., (1985) 'Jenny Holzer's Language Games (interview)' *Arts Magazine*, 60, December
- Simon, J. (1988) *Jenny Holzer: Signs*. Institute of Contemporary Arts.
- Singerman, H. (2004) A history of the Whitney Independent Study Program—in theory and practice, *Artforum* 62(6), pp. 112–117
- Sutton, S., (2020). *Gentrification and the increasing significance of racial transition in New York City 1970–2010*. *Urban Affairs Review*, 56(1), pp.65-95.
- The Modern, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, (2012) *Tuesday Evenings at the Modern. Jenny Holzer*. [Audio File] [online] available from <<https://www.themodern.org/podcast/jenny-holzer>> [May 2021]
- Waldman, D. (1989) *Jenny Holzer*. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.
- Wesseling, E. (2004) 'Judith Rich Harris: The Miss Marple of Developmental Psychology.' *Science in Context* 17(3), pp. 293-314.
- WMAA, Whitney Museum of American Art (2021) *History of the Whitney*, [online] available from <<https://whitney.org/about/history>> [April 2021]

Activism, Participation and Art during the Pandemic. The Project *Back to the Future of Public Space*

Cecilia De Marinis, Dorotea Ottaviani

Rhizoma Design and Research Lab

contact@rhizomalab.com

Abstract

2020 has challenged our ways of living and making sense of the world, driving us to rethinking our daily life in both the private and public spheres.

Public space has especially been questioned; our understanding of it and the way we use it have been completely revolutionised, opening up new interpretations and evaluations.

At the end of 2020 Rhizoma Design and Research Lab launched a Call for Postcards, inviting architects, designers, artists, and activists to reflect upon the paradigm shift happening in our cities, observing and documenting the changing everyday praxis of inhabiting public space as well as envisioning its future, capturing those reflections and ideas in a Postcard.

In a time when access to public space was restricted and art in public was paused, the call explored the role of a virtual space for the active creation, sharing, and fruition of public artworks.

The call led to a virtual and physical exhibition titled *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020*¹, which has become an observatory of, perspectives, memories, and visions that are currently shaping public space, transforming the individual contributions in a collective narrative.

Keywords: public space, pandemic, activism, postcards, exhibition

To cite this article:

De Marinis, C. and Ottaviani, D. (2022) "Activism, Participation and Art during the Pandemic. The Project Back to the Future of Public Space", *The Journal of Public Space*, 7(3). pp. 87-100. doi: 10.32891/jps.v7i3.1591.

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

¹ Link to the research project web page:

<https://www.rhizomalab.com/research/backtothefutureofpublicspace>

1. The project *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020*

The outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 has signed a very emotional and critical milestone in the life of cities all around the world.

Governments and rulers have globally imposed restrictions both in terms of accessibility to public space and the ways to use it. Those shifts have deeply affected the physical and emotional engagement that people have with the urban environment. Limitations have applied to multiple aspects of urban life, from the recreational perspective to the possibility of exercising cultural rights connected with the physical presence in the public realm such as the freedom of assembly or expression.

In this context, we as Rhizoma Design and Research Lab², started the practice-based project *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020*, which explored, through a creative investigation, how those unprecedented events have influenced and transformed the perception and use of public space around the world.

With the intention to contribute and foster a larger conversation around the evolving role of public space, the project aimed to create a collective and imaginative depiction of individual narratives on the alteration of uses and feelings around public space during the pandemic.

The virtual and physical exhibition that emerged from this coral reflection encapsulated thoughts, fears, and hopes on the role that the public space plays and will play in our future lives.

2. The genealogy of the project

Since the very beginning of the pandemic outbreak, we started a reflection on the compelling yet daunting possibility that the health crisis would lead to a reassessment of the values, functions, and uses of public space.

Our early speculations on how the pandemic was changing the everyday praxis of inhabiting public space were conceived as part of the book chapter *New Urban Choreographies. Cohabiting public space in the time of a pandemic*.³

In this text we suggested the idea that people's movements in public space evoke a dance made of a combination of improvisation and choreographed movements, imposed by the new social distancing rules and creating a new urban choreography. We investigated how bodies perform differently in this new dimension and how they communicated with each other fear, care, and compliance with the norms and the authority, as a reaction to the new circumstances.

The concept of the 'new concerted dance'⁴ helped us describe the new choreography of movements and practice happening in public space. The concept aimed to interpret how

² Rhizoma Design and Research Lab is a design and research lab founded by Dr Dorotea Ottaviani and Dr Cecilia De Marinis based in Rome, Italy and Melbourne, Australia. Dr Ottaviani and Dr De Marinis are both architects and researchers with professional and academic experience in many international universities such as RMIT, Virginia Tech, Deakin University, University of Johannesburg, Roma Tre University and Glasgow School of Art. They investigate the spatial and experiential dynamics of architecture, especially focusing on public space and how people use, enjoy, and transform it.

³ C. De Marinis, D. Ottaviani. *New Urban Choreographies. Cohabiting public space in the time of a pandemic* In M. Milocco Borlini, A. Califano (Eds.) *Urban Corporis X Unexpected - Special Issue*. Anteferma Edizioni, Conegliano, Italy, 2021, p. 154-166

⁴ Ibidem.

bodies were transforming the way they occupy and inhabit public space based on a mixture of spontaneous reactions and a rigid system of movements and spatial dispositions. Among other considerations, it seemed clear that physical bodies needed more space and distances between them.

Under this analysis, the idea of a 'new concerted dance', distant, explicit, and partly regulated, seemed in open contrast with the scholarly knowledge on public space that, up to 2020, would claim proximity, density, indeterminacy, and ambiguity as positive characteristics to be achieved in public space.

To substantiate our initial observations and also being curious about how others would perceive this situation we posted on social media an invitation to send images from all over the world depicting how public space was affected by the new regulations and restrictions.

A small selection of received images accompanied the narrative in the aforementioned book chapter, although we realised how the pictures received were telling so many stories and different perspectives of these unprecedented times prompting our interest in exploring the hint further and giving a voice to all of these narratives.

3. The Call for Postcards

Consequently, we realised the potential of researching those ideas further, through the eyes and minds of a large multitude of people, located in very different parts of the world but similarly affected by those limitations. Therefore, we designed and launched the call for postcards titled, *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020* with the idea of reaching different and distant voices through social media and the internet. The idea behind the call was to invite participants to reflect upon the paradigm shift happening in our cities, observing and documenting the changing everyday praxis of inhabiting public space as well as envisioning its possible futures.

The title aimed to suggest reflections on how, in times of crisis, the solution may not only be to wish and hope for a restoration of the previous status quo, but rather take the crisis as an opportunity to explore different possibilities and imagine alternative futures.

Moreover, the format of the Postcard was a provocation *per se* as it encapsulates the idea of travelling - one of the activities forbidden during the pandemic - through the simple combination of a full frame visual artwork, e.g. image, drawing, photographs etc, on the front and room for a short text on the back.

The call was very successful, we received contributions from all over the world and made a selection of 45 postcards to be part of both a virtual and a physical exhibition⁵. Our curatorial strategy in selecting the postcards is to be considered as the initial step for the creation of a participative observatory of perspectives, memories, and visions that are currently shaping public space.

4. A collective narrative

Initially, the call proposed three streams, reflecting on the linear timeline of present, past, and future of public space in relation to the pandemic: *Present* invited participants to observe and document the current praxis of inhabiting public space; *Past* focused on

⁵ <https://www.rhizomalab.com/back-to-the-future-of-public-space>

identifying traces of the past in the current praxis of inhabiting public space; *Future* urged participants to imagine scenarios, visions, and projects for the future of public space. However, participants responded to the call by going beyond those streams, mixing them and offering insights besides a linear timeline. Therefore, observing and analysing the 45 selected postcards, we identified new transversal themes, which added complexity and depth to the three initial streams. Those new categories - *Intimacy*, *Emotions*, *Politics*, *New Urban Choreographies*, and *Envisioning* - emerging from the participants' body of work, were used to trace red threads through the collection of postcards and create a narrative of the collective body of work, guiding the audience through the experience of the exhibition.

The category *Intimacy* explores the idea of personal space and the intimate connection among people, observing how it has been called into question by the pandemic. An example is Yimin Qiao's postcard, which depicts a public space hosting a device for remote kissing (Figure 1).

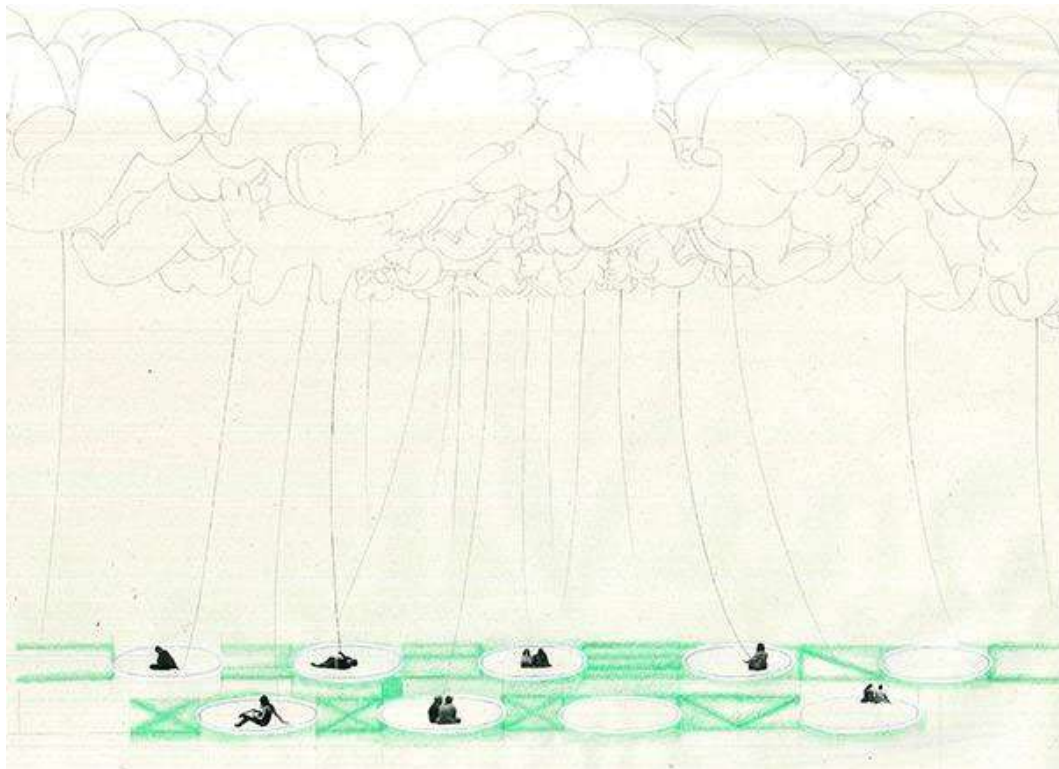


Figure 1. *Helium Balloon*, Yimin Qiao, 2021.

The delicate postcard reimagines the intimate relationship among people as mediated by a tool delivering intimate physical messages. The tool, depicted as a system of clouds in the postcard, stores and shares intimate and sensorial data, reminding of the contemporary idea of the 'cloud' as a centre of data stored and shared among people operating remotely.

Despite very different media and subjects, numerous postcards addressed the complex interrelation of emotions that a year of lockdown and uncertainty sparked. For the

category *Emotions*, the postcard by Frida Rahne (Figure 2), well expresses the contradictory emotions of those arduous times: the image of an elderly man at the window, on the one side embeds an idea of solitude and tiredness, on the other, suggests rest and enjoyment of simple things.



Figure 2. *Burnout Society*, Frida Rahne, 2021.

The space at the edge between the private and the public, the window, becomes the stage for the expression of mixed emotions in relation to this changed dynamic between the private and the public.

The category *Politics* explores a more public aspect: how restrictions have limited the freedom of expression for the multitude of voices usually inhabiting public space. The postcard by Sara Sanchez (Figure 3) reflects on what urbanist and activist Jane Jacobs would have thought looking at public space during the pandemic and how not surprised she would have been of a public space that still doesn't respond to the needs of the community, the pandemic making this even more visible and urgent.

The category *New Urban Choreographies* depicts the different ways in which public life has been transformed by an orchestrated choreography of bodies and movements shaping people's dynamics in public space as if it were a 'concerted dance' (De Marinis, Ottaviani, 2021, p.160). The postcard by Angela Miceli (Figure 4) depicts this dynamic showing the new geometrical and ruled graphics dominating common spaces, in relation to the interior dimension of infinite and unruled spatiality, as represented by artist Yayoi Kusama standing in one of her artworks.



Figure 3. *Jane Jacobs, NOT surprised*, Sara Sanchez, 2021.



Figure 4. *Social Distance Dots° vs Infinity Dots°*, Angela Maria Miceli, 2021.

The category *Envisioning* shows possible futures and scenarios of life after the pandemic. An interesting insight comes from the postcard by Giulia Bonaiuti (Figure 5), which reflects on the idea of shaping new individual realities, suggesting the urge to reimagine new forms of connections with public space. A boy is drawing his own boundaries and activities in a public space where there is no shape and no function and where everything is to be reimaged.

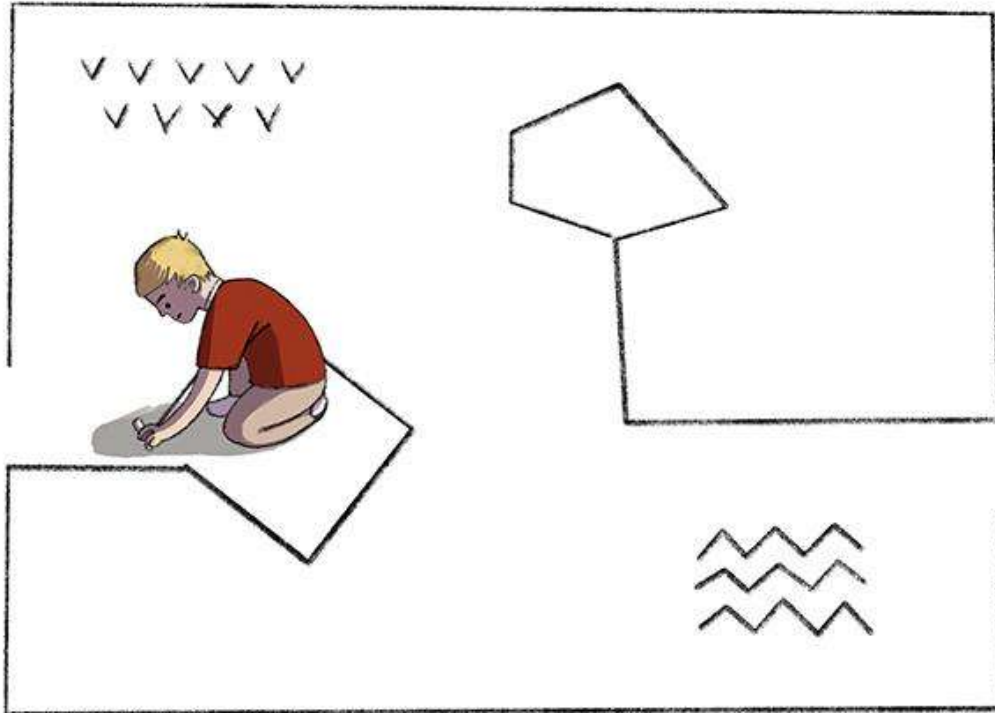


Figure 5. *BOTTOM UP*, Giulia Bonaiuti, 2021

5. The exhibition: a virtual and physical journey

The exhibition has been imagined as a format to be adjusted to both virtual and physical settings. Its first edition was launched in March 2021 online through the Rhizoma Design and Research Lab website⁶ presenting the authors and the selected postcards as a virtual collective narrative and observatory of public space during and after the pandemic.

Following the first edition, the exhibition has been travelling both virtually and physically.

It was showcased online at the Media and Architecture Biennale 2020 (MAB20) titled *Futures Implied* which was held in June and July 2021. The MAB20 portal has been hosting the exhibition under the category: Playful and Artistic Civic Engagement.⁷

The exhibition has also travelled physically around the globe. Firstly, it was displayed in Australia at the A+B Gallery of the School of Architecture and Built Environment,

⁶ Link to the website: www.rhizomalab.com

⁷ Link to the MAB20 webpage: <https://demos.mediaarchitecture.org/mab/project/10>

Deakin University, in May 2021 (Figure 6); then in the US at the Rhizome LLC Lounge of Virginia Tech, in September 2021 (Figure 7); and at the time of writing this paper, it's travelling to Europe to be hosted in different institutions (Figure 11).



Figure 6. Exhibition of *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020* at the A+B Gallery, School of Architecture and Built Environment, Deakin University, Australia, May 2021. Photo by Cecilia De Marinis.

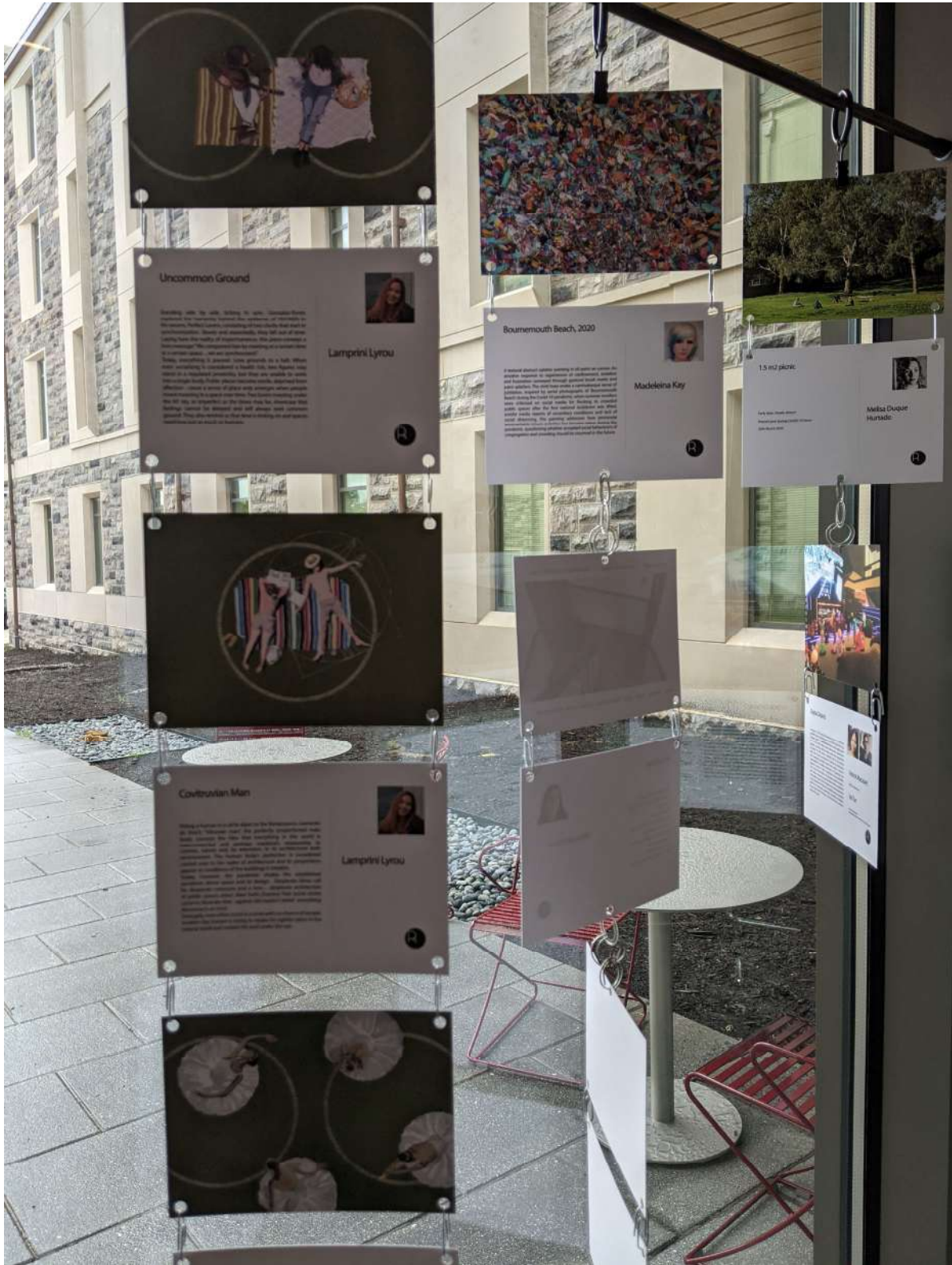


Figure 7. Exhibition of *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020* at the Rhizome Living Learning Community Lounge at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, USA, September 2021. Photo by Grant Hamming.

The format of the exhibition as a collection of postcards - small-scale and homogeneous objects - facilitates its mobility and its capacity to perform well both in the digital and the physical realms. It can easily travel and it can be adjusted to different spaces, surfaces, and external conditions.

The journey of the exhibition, which has been hosted and welcomed by different institutions, suggests the importance of discussing the role of public space in our ever-changing world.

6. The curatorial project: a flexible design for a Do-It-Yourself exhibition

The exhibition was imagined as a travelling entity that could adapt and be shaped by the place and the community that hosted it; therefore, the exhibition design project envisioned a Do-It-Yourself configuration. The format involves an instruction manual, received by the host institution together with the postcards and based on visual communication only, with no words involved, to make sure that everyone everywhere can make sense of it (Figure 8). Some minimal rules and suggestions on how to curate the exhibition of postcards are presented to guide the on-site curators.

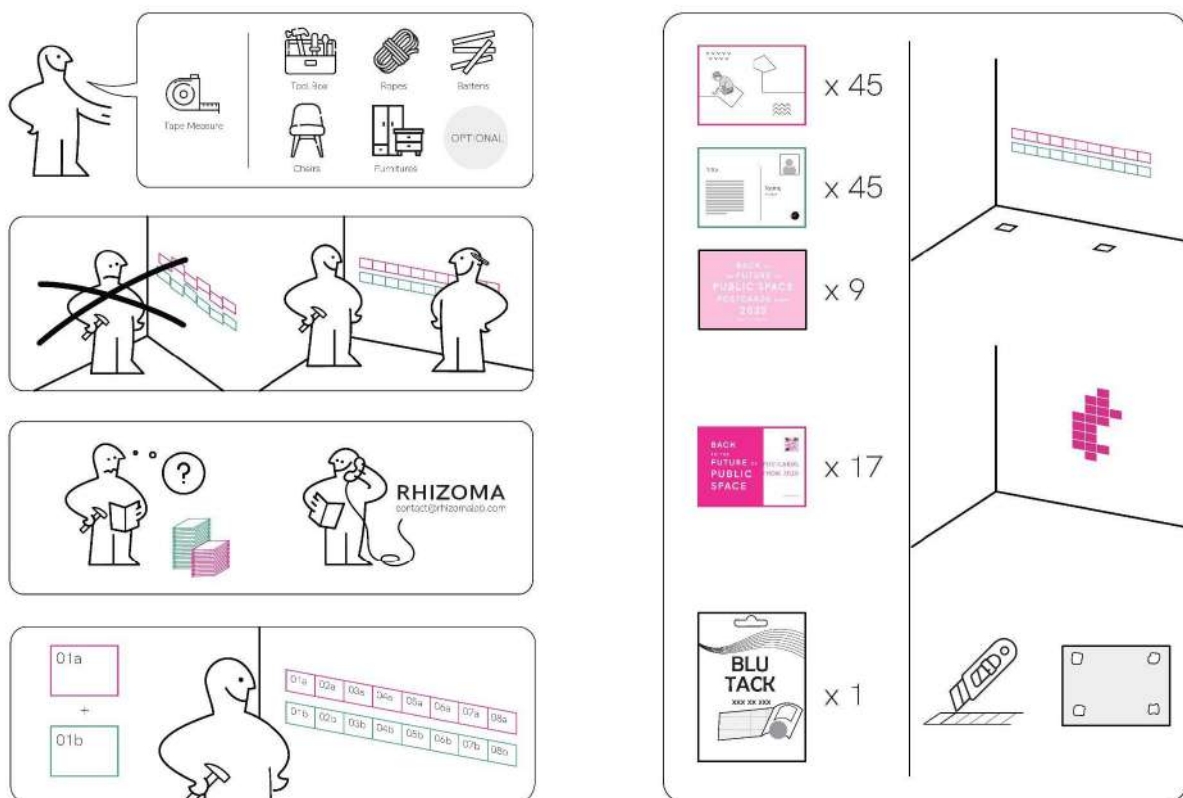


Figure 8. *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020*, Instruction Manual, Rhizoma Design and Research Lab in collaboration with Annan Zuo, 2021.



The manual offers possible scenarios of postcards set on walls different in size and shape, as well as design options that the host can use as a starting point. It also offers different scenarios of how the human body can experience the exhibition, and defines minimal distances and spaces (Figure 9).

Furthermore, the manual reveals the infinite potential of the exhibition, only made of postcards, simple rectangular bidimensional small-size elements, that can be easily adapted to any physical setting, demonstrating the flexibility of the format. All the elements of the exhibition, including posters presenting the project, the authors, and the curators, are similarly made of a combination of postcards: this allows for multiple arrangements and distributions, maintaining the same content.

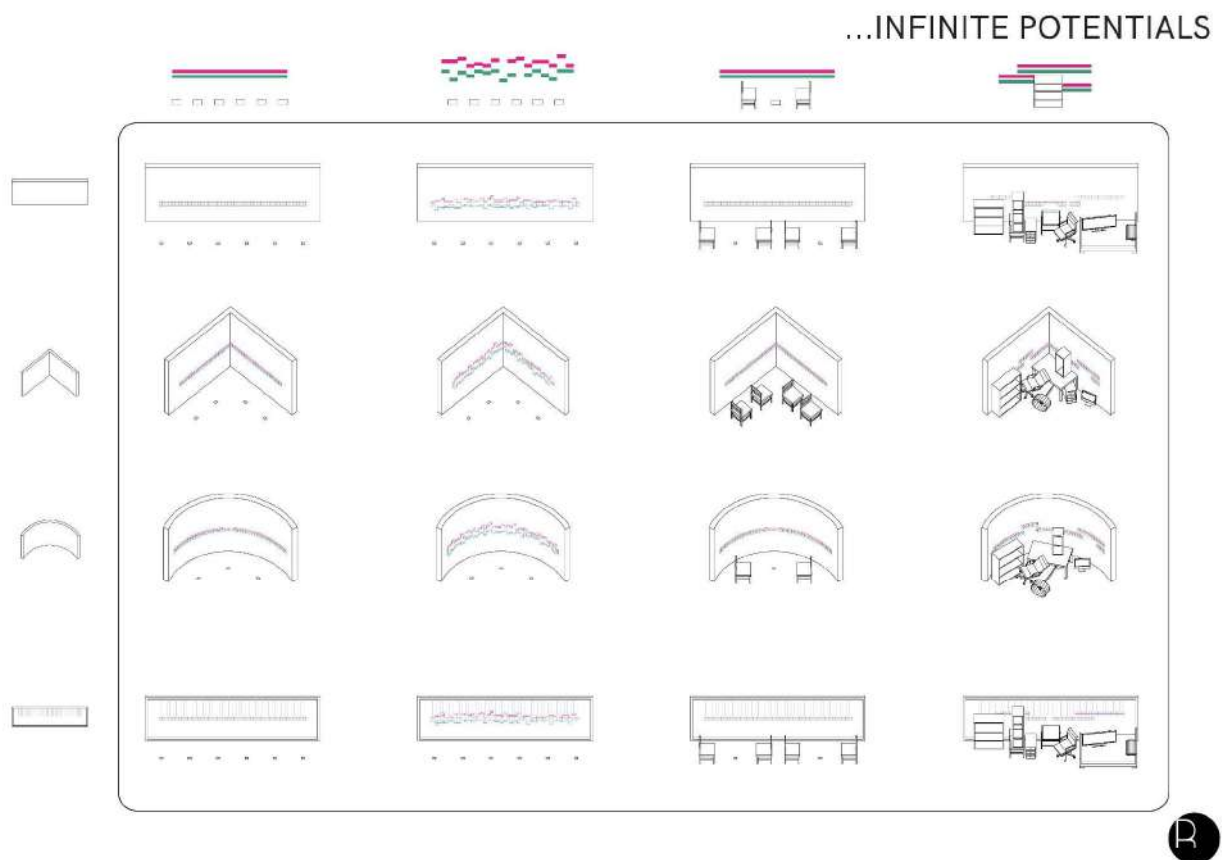


Figure 9. *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020*, Instruction Manual, Rhizoma Design and Research Lab in collaboration with Annan Zuo, 2021.

The Do-It-Yourself exhibition format aims to generate participation and interest in the themes and provocations presented by the postcards. The community of participants in the exhibition expands while travelling with new authors and new curators contributing to the ongoing dissemination and discussion.

8. Conclusions

Through a creative and participative approach, the presented exhibition and associated activities contribute to a broader discussion over the role of public space in our cities in an era of constant revolutions (Bauman, 2003) where the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the many challenges that contemporary cities have to face, although it has accelerated the global discussion over the future of cities.

The exhibition, as an artistic collection of insights, provocations, reflections, visions, brings a creative light to the discussion, inviting participants to represent their insights and provocations creatively and artistically, through the use of different media and technologies.

Moreover, participation has had a pivotal role in the exhibition and it has been achieved at three different levels: the level of the collective artistic narrative, the curatorial level applying a Do-It-Yourself approach, and the subsequent level of participation in events resulting from the exhibition.



Figure 10. Prof Deborah Sim with SOVA students organising the setup of the *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020* exhibition at the Rhizome Living Learning Community Lounge at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, USA. September 2021. Photo by Grant Hamming.

Finally, the series of events and presentations derived from the exhibition has produced participation of local and digital communities.

The call and the resulting exhibitions have given voice to diverse and heterogeneous individual reflections on public space, intertwining those voices and creating a collective narrative: artists, architects, designers, activists, academics, have generously contributed to formulate a visual discussion over the topic

Furthermore, the Do-It-Yourself approach to the exhibition reaffirms the intention to generate participation, through the creative engagement of institutions and communities that hosted the exhibition, which were called to interpret and adapt the exhibition to their specific context (Figure 10).



Figure 11. Exhibition of *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020* at the Public Space Museum in Bologna, Italy, hosted by City Space Architecture, November – December 2021. Photo by Dorotea Ottaviani.

Social media and digital platforms, in this respect, have played a critical role in conveying and spreading information, creativity, and conversations. The call has received contributions and attendance from all over the globe, creating an interesting dynamic between the global and the local level of the discussion.

The creative enquiry addressed by this project brings new understanding of the perception of public space in contemporary cities. Creative insights generated through this project can inform further investigation on what role public space will play in the

future and how it will creatively be adapted and transformed in the service of individual and collective needs.

References

- Bauman, Z. (2003) *Cities of Fear Cities of Hope*. London: Goldsmiths College, University of London.
- Bauman, Z. (2016) *Strangers at Our Door*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Biennial of Public Space (2013). *Charter of Public Space*. Rome. Available at https://inu.it/wp-content/uploads/Inglese_CHARTER_OF_PUBLIC_SPACE.pdf
- Cobe, Wagner, M., and Cirelli, J. (2006) *Our Urban Living Room – Learning from Copenhagen*. Stockholm: Arvinius + Orfeus Publishing AB.
- De Marinis, C., Ottaviani, D. (2021) *New Urban Choreographies. Cohabiting public space in the time of a pandemic*. In M. Milocco Borlini, A. Califano (Eds.) *Urban Corporis X Unexpected - Special Issue*. Antefirma Edizioni, Conegliano, Italy, p. 154-166.
- Sorkin, M. (2011) *All Over the Map: Writing on Buildings and Cities*. New York: Verso.
- Sassen, S. (1994) *Cities in a World Economy*. 4th. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.
- Jacobs, J. (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.
- Whyte, W. H. (1980) *The social life of small urban spaces*. Washington DC: The Conservation Foundation.

Reinhabiting in Huaniao Island. Creative Practices Work on challenging ‘Culture Aphasia’ Issues in Rural Regeneration

Ye (Sherry) Liu

RMIT University, School of Art, Australia

s3612523@student.rmit.edu.au

Abstract

This paper argues that the loss of cultural memories is an essential issue that challenges the social transformation in Chinese rural regeneration and proposes 'reinhabiting the place' as a potential to empower the traditional community and contribute to renewing cultural connections. Based on my experience of the residency period and other artists' practice on the Huaniao Island, this portfolio explores 'culture aphasia' in the rural revitalization of Huaniao island. It investigates the 2nd Huaniao Island International Public Art Festival's social engagement practice and explores how creative strategies operate to reinhabit the place and re-establish cultural connections. The text explores how artists work proactively with residents and visitors, reconstruct the cultural memories, and renew affective engagement of the community.

Keywords: Huaniao Island, International Public Art Festival, culture aphasia, reinhabiting, Chinese rural regeneration, social engagement

To cite this article:

Liu, Y. (2022) "Reinhabiting in Huaniao Island: Creative Practices Work on Challenging 'Culture Aphasia' Issues in Rural Regeneration", *The Journal of Public Space*, 7(3). pp. 101-116. doi: 10.32891/jps.v7i3.1592.

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Introduction

Nowadays, notions of remoteness, dilapidation, naturalness and economic backwardness are often associated with traditional Chinese villages. Since industrialization, there have been considerable challenges in retaining the countryside in China. The concept of rural China was once considered backward, and its characteristics has been changed and dropped in the transformation of urbanization (Fei, 1992). Particularly, the demolition of traditional villages and the changed social economic system caused a sense of disconnecting. For these sudden changes, people have not been embedded into the new social context and gained a sense of belonging (Fei, 1992).

However, rural culture is the foundation of traditional Chinese society and the bond that maintains the national sentiment (Fei, 2001). Its concept and meaning contain a sense of home, both physical and spiritual. Therefore, in 1980, traditional village protection was first proposed in academic field. But it was only in 2012 that the government officially promoted the rural protection movement (Zhang, Xia & Lue, 2021). During the past decade, the government, architects, and planners have collaborated on pioneering work to draw more attention to rural culture. However, the practice has proved that improving the spatial environment and public facilities and protecting architectural style is not enough to solve the issue of "rural hollowing and human dispirited" (Zhang, Xia & Lue, 2021). Since 2017, the Chinese government on the nineteenth National People's Congress proposed 'cultural tourism' should be applied in rural society for urban regeneration and reducing the difference between city and village (Ba, 2018). Therefore, in recent years, many cultural tourism projects have sprung up. However, the results are not as anticipated. I argue that the most critical issue should be 'culture aphasia' that is, that because tourism development has ignored the original cultural values of the rural area, its distinctive character has been lost. In addition, tourism industries break down the relational pattern of the rural society, and reconstruction projects destroy the local materials, which are narratives of cultural memories.

According to Fei (2001), the most prominent feature of Chinese rural society is relationship - affective connections between people and people, people and the land, people and space. But today's tourism industries drive a rapid modernized model, which has a colonized trend into a rural area. The new economic system did not provide time and space for the continuation of culture. These consequences have caused the loss of traditions, and the rural society is becoming a past social formation. In this case, re-inhabiting the place from restoring connections and reconstructing a living community seems significant to build new cultural values and memories based on a more profound understanding of the relationship. Huaniao Island International Public Art Festival is a socially engaged art festival that understands the past and empowers rural regeneration and connected cultural tourism. It activates the place physically and emotionally by exploring the local culture and communities. This festival is organized by the Shengsi Government and Huaniao Micro Holiday Tourism Ltd, seeking an alternative strategy to activate rural communities and contribute to cultural tourism. It develops a hybrid mode for artist residencies that involves local on site and virtual gathering. More than thirty artists from different backgrounds from the School of Art at RMIT University, Australia, Shanghai for Science and Technology University, China and EINA University, Barcelona, Spain participated in this festival. These artists worked locally and remotely,

exploring different art forms to empower local culture and renew a sense of place. As a curatorial team member who works closely with all parties, I will introduce this project from the perspective of 'reinhabiting' and propose that 'coming home and 'becoming natives' are critical towards the sustainability of rural culture in Chinese cultural tourism development.

Revisiting the place: from the perspective of a visitor to an observer to a native

From March to May 2021, a group of artists and me I undertook a local residency on the Huaniao Island. We initially experienced the place like a traveller, moving in the environment to seek encounters in the trip.

Natural, beautiful, remote, free, ancient, slow, expectative, wild, dangerous, traditional, modern, inconvenience these words came to my mind when I finished the first time visiting the island. This reflects that natural environment made a deep impression on me. The landscape is enchanting and evokes visitors' affection for the natural environment. However, cultural experience is not rich relative to the natural environment. The current tourism development has not realized the potential of rural culture, and the industrial transformation caused the loss of cultural memory.

With the investigation of the local archives, we learned more contexts and histories of this place. Located in the remote eastern waters of China, Huaniao Island is a traditional rural area with two thousand years of history (Figure 1). It has been colonized by Britain during the war period. Residents lived on fishing, built houses from stone, engaged in simple agricultural activities here in the past. But with the aggravating impact of extreme climatic conditions and overfishing, Huaniao Island has been experiencing population loss since 1998 because islanders have been going away from this island to work (Shengsi Government, 2022). There are only about seven hundred original residents left, most are over sixty years of age, living in two villages on the island -- Huaniao village and Lighthouse village (Shengsi Government, 2022). Young people became rare on this island after the shutdown of the only elementary school.

In 2016, responding to the government policy, Huaniao Island has done the first attempt to develop tourism for social transformation. Tourism industries changed the traditional economic model and modified the Huaniao village (Figure 2) into modern style buildings. However, tourism ignores the cultural dimensions that disembedded social relations from local contexts and caused a sense of alienation. The community is moving towards a state of administration and marketization. The historical value has become piecemeal, even been forgotten, while the new social order is not yet formed in this field. The new community and traditional community are two different powers on the island that seriously challenges the amalgamation and evolution of culture. The new sense of place has not yet formed.

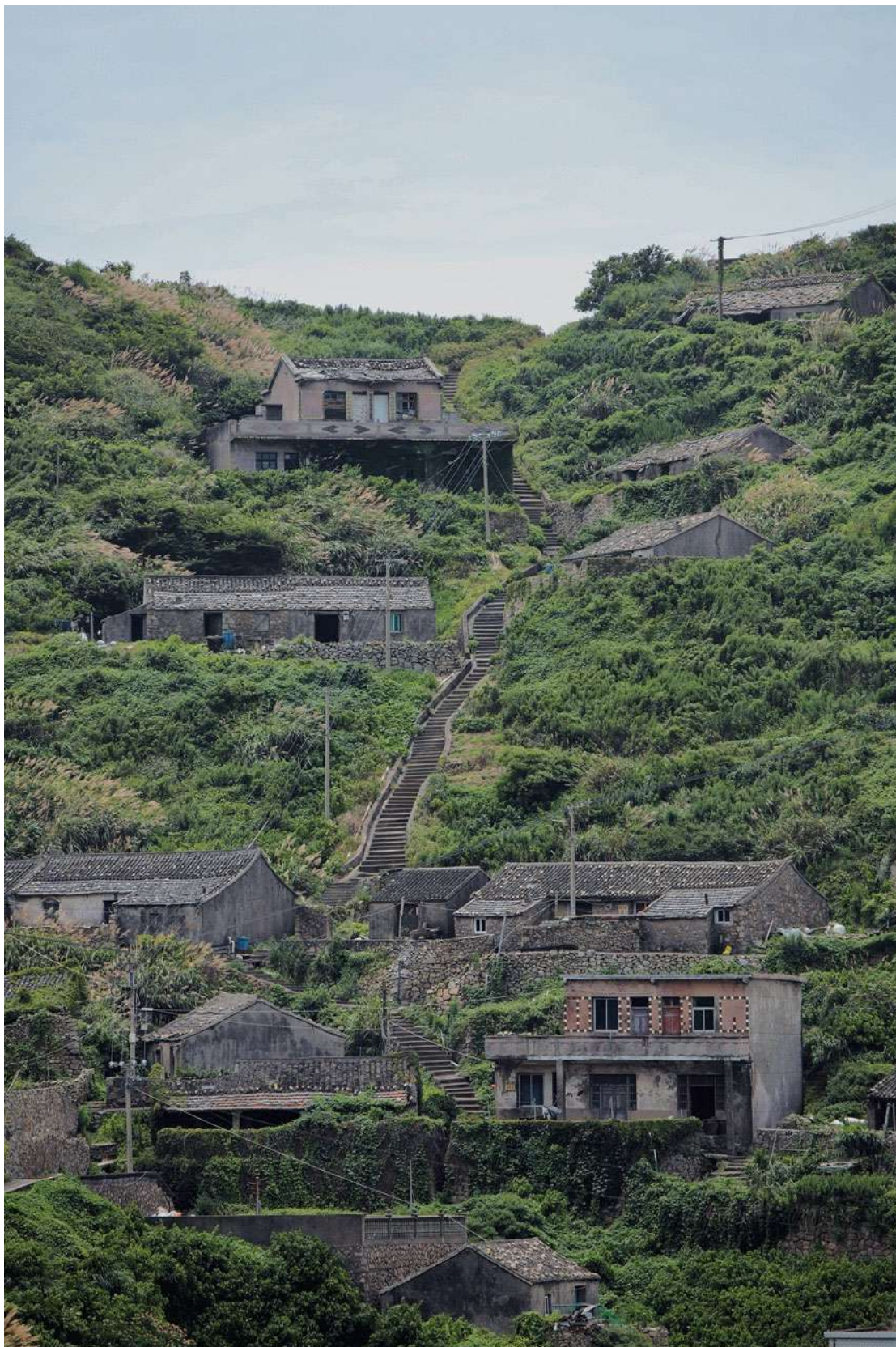


Figure 1. The Lighthouse village (2021). Photo by Zhouzhou Yu.



Figure 2. Huaniao village (2021). Photo by Su Ye.

Considering the previous colonized experience, as outsiders we were careful in making art plans to bring contemporary art to such a traditional island. In order to respond to the place, artists were required to consider the concept of ‘encounter’ and ‘field’, developing a poetic way to engage the local people and environment. Artists focused on a ‘becoming’ process that embraced intersubjective understanding and decolonization. Gruenewald (2003) states that the significant factor involved in decolonization is the development of the ability to recognize ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and place.

It requires artists to see beyond the private and individual and establish a relationship with residents upon mutual interests and respect. The artists’ primary approach was to blend in with the neighbourhood rather than make some loud pronouncement about us coming from somewhere else.

Therefore, we employed multi-sensory ethnography and participatory observation (Figure 3) to achieve my and others' embodied experience. Embedding body into the field, we explored local events, histories, and customs and communicated with local people. These embodied experiences are usually combined with the metaphors of culture, forming the foundations of cultural values (Yu, 2015). Nikos Papastergiadis and Gerardo Mosquera (2014) mention that the vitality and importance of culture relies on exchange and is benefited by communication.

Through this process, we observed several affective structures of the community that were useful for us in identifying the issues and challenged our artistic practice.



Figure 3. Visiting lighthouse village (2021). Photo by Su Ye.

Attachment to nature

The reason that visitors and investors move onto the island can be often attributed to attachment – the emotional bond between human and natural wonders. People are keen on the wonderfulness of landscapes and want to escape from the city.

Ambivalence of native home

The following is a summary of dialogues between islanders and me on Huaniao Island.

Islanders: "Do you like here?"

Sherry: "Yes."

Islanders: "Do you think this is a good place?"

Sherry: "Sure, don't you think so?"

Islanders: "No, this is not a good place. Young people don't want to stay here, and they all leave to the big city. There would never be a new mariner because the younger generations have no ability or interest in fishing - and why should they, if it's hard and dangerous work that pays so poorly"

Sherry: "Why don't you move out and live with the kids?"

Islanders: "I don't want to move; I'm used to the life here."

The elderly is caught in a contradiction in that they have a deep attachment to this place, but they hold a doubtful attitude towards the sustainability of the fishing culture here. Population migration and low income of the fishing deprives the dignity of original residents.

Cultural nostalgia

Although the island has been developing tourism industries and investing in renovation projects in the past three years, for the elderly, the community has become more

indifferent. Most of them live alone, and the other rooms of their houses have become empty and dilapidated by long periods of uninhabited conditions and the lack of care. The industrial transformation has gradually exploited and degenerated local environment and traditions, leading to a loss of cultural memories and a sense of belonging.

From the above observation, it was apparent that these emotions are produced by the impact of modernization on the area that finally caused a complex cultural dilemma. I consider this cultural dilemma is a phenomenon of rural 'culture aphasia', and it has several features:

- The affective bonds – the unique characteristic of rural society, have been disconnected in the new community.
- The administrated and market-oriented model deprives the right of the public.
- The reconstruction project changed the place image and degenerated the cultural memories.
- New culture is challenging because of a lack of consideration of the specific context of the place.
- The new cultural value cannot meet the needs of a wider community of life or act as an ecological way of daily conduct.

Therefore, aiming to deal with this phenomenon, I proposed a practice embedded in the concept of re-inhabiting a place that has ever been exploited, destroyed, and hurt. Re-inhabitation describes 'coming home' and 'to become native'. *“It involves identifying, affirming, conserving, and creating those focus on cultural knowledge that nurtures and protect people and the ecosystem”* (Gruenewald, 2003a). This process means continuously hunting for connections with the place, experiencing reciprocity and empathy between people and the living community.

Coming home: this is Huaniao Island

It is essential to integrate different cultural groups and form a social cohesion that respects each other. My research into social practices argues that socially engaged art can offer an activity-oriented approach, and it should be a more accessible model of rebuilding connections.

Culture as the subject of creation to seek exchanges

Socially engaged art can be an interjection into the lives of the community. It offers a chance for dialogue on an equal footing. Such an approach is based on shared emotions and memories through participation and interaction.

This was the approach taken by all the artists involved in the Huaniao Island International Public Art Festival. For example, artist Yan Wang focused on the food culture on the island and developed an experimental photography project Daily Catch (2021) (Figure 4) on the main street. Her artwork is based on various foods that the artist ate and came across during her residency.

Another artist, Xinwei Wu created To the Lighthouse (2021) (Figure 5). This took the form of a video ethnography that focused on the elderly's living situation and stories in the lighthouse village. Their collaborative art practice built on concepts such as relational aesthetics (Nicolas Bourriaud, 1995) and dialogical aesthetics to facilitate communication between different cultural groups.



Figure 4. Daily Catch (2021), installation art. Yan Wang. Photo provided by the Ruijia Fan.

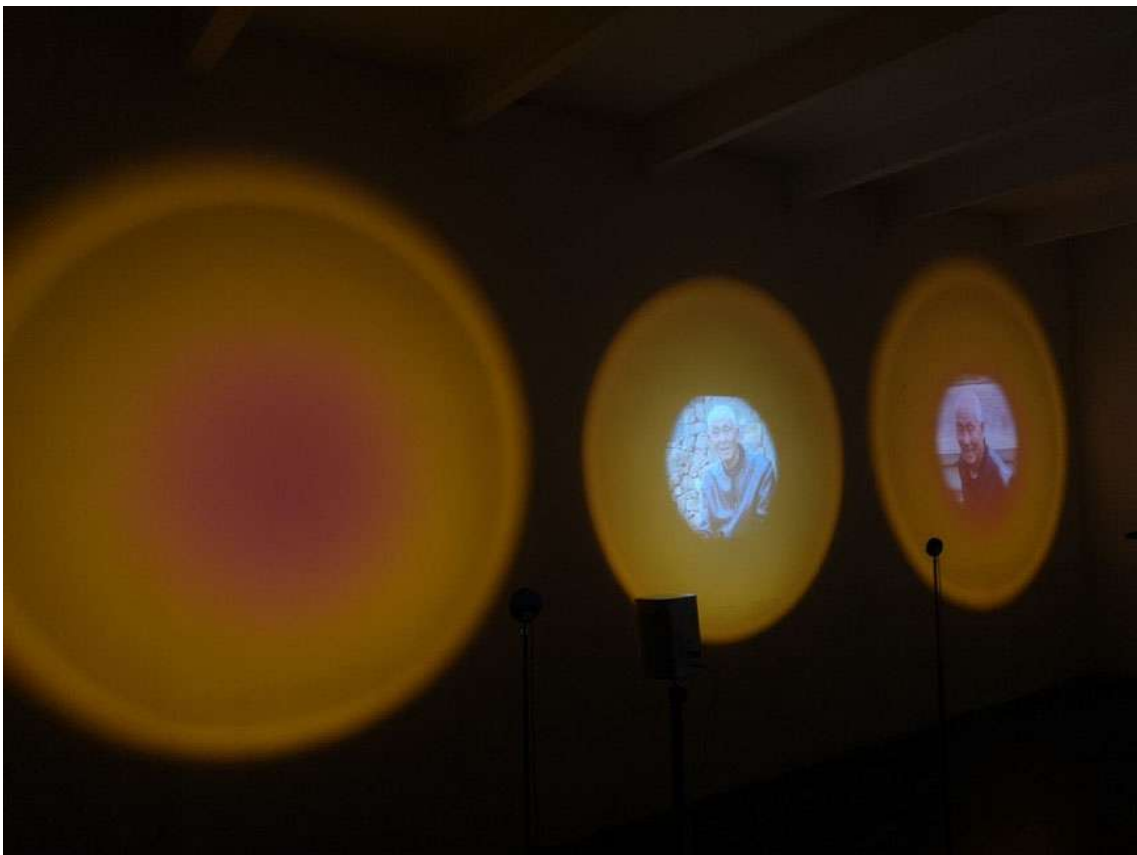


Figure 5. To the lighthouse (2021), installation art. Xinwei Wu. Photo by Xinwei Wu.

According to Grant Kester (2005), “The dialogical practices require a common discursive matrix (linguistic textual, physical etc.) through which participants can share insights and forge a provisional sense of collectivity”. When artists choose culture as the subject, they have to communicate with residents and deepen their understanding of local knowledge, history, and customs. This, in turn, helps residents recognize their living wisdom and cultural values (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Artists Yan Wang and Xinwei Wu communicate with the local elderly residents (2021). Photo by Su Ye.

‘Remembering the past’ as an event for becoming new culture memories

Maurice Halbwachs (1952) proposed 'Collective memory' and highlighted the importance of public participation, and the actions of remembering the past could be regarded as remodelling a social mechanism.

Ruijia Fan visited all the fishermen on the island and recorded their stories of the past. She learned the knotting and weaving techniques from local fishermen and created the artwork *Tying Knots* (2021) (Figure 6) hung in the traditional Longevity Pavilion. This artwork became a new cultural memory to communicate and interact with different cultural groups. Its process also focused attention on the past stories and encouraged the sustainable development of traditional skills.



Figure 7. Tying Knots (2021), installation art. Ruijia Fan, Photo by Fuijia Fan.

Memory Preservation (2021) (Figure 8) involved collecting representative objects and sharing memories of these objects. Artists and villagers got together to reflect on the past cultural uniqueness of this place, and jointly explored and revealed the regenerative potential. Their consciousness of the place organically wove into new stories created during the participation.

Becoming native: we are on Huaniao Island

Besides integrating the social powers in the community, re-inhabiting also requires providing an integration context for understanding the place from an ecological and sustainable perspective. Therefore, artists not only needed to see the uniqueness of local life on the island but also realize the relations hidden behind it, the close and harsh relationship between human beings and nature, civilization, and social development. Then, through comprehensive artistic expressions to create various encounters in different dialogues and enlightenment.



Figure 8. Memory Preservation (2021), collaborative installation art by artists and villagers. Photo by Su Ye.

Action for 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'

Developing socially engaged art for public interest and social design is essential. When the project operates, it triggers strong emotional responses because of the meet of social needs hidden under the reality. From the perspective of humanistic care, the Family Portrait Project (2021) (Figure 9) Edward Lin focuses on the living and mental state of the elderly on the island. The project aimed to express respect and care for the elderly. "In the old people's homes, they miss the children who left their hometown, but there are no touchable family photos at home that can remind them of the past. This moment is probably the best we can do something for them" (Edward, 2021). In addition, Artist Dongchen Sun used her graffiti *The word of flower* (2021) (Figure 9) to activate the local space to bring happiness to the elderly.



Figure 9. Family portrait project (2021). Edward Lin. Photo by Su Ye.



Figure 10. The word of flower (2021), graffiti. Dongchen Sun. Photo by Su Ye.

“They are also as cute as children, just like those birds lingering among the flowers” (Sun, 2021). Such projects highlight what can still be learnt from such concepts as the 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (Paulo Freire, 1970) and redefine the consciousness of homeland for the public. When the public identifies the voice inside themselves, an intense feeling is triggered and pushes them to accept what they indeed want to change.

Taking wider responsibilities to the reality

One of the essentials of socially engaged art is to support the public's rights. But besides the positive and appeaseable voice, artists should respond to the age of terror. Bennett (2012) proposed that art can record the harsh reality and evoke a proactive confrontation for a broader co-existing community. Using bioluminescent algae as the element, Rory Daniel inspected the issue of humans and marine life, attempting to re-imagine the human body as another lifeform. He created the work *Tears of Blue* (2021) (Figure 11) that reminds audiences of the evolution and relationship between organisms.

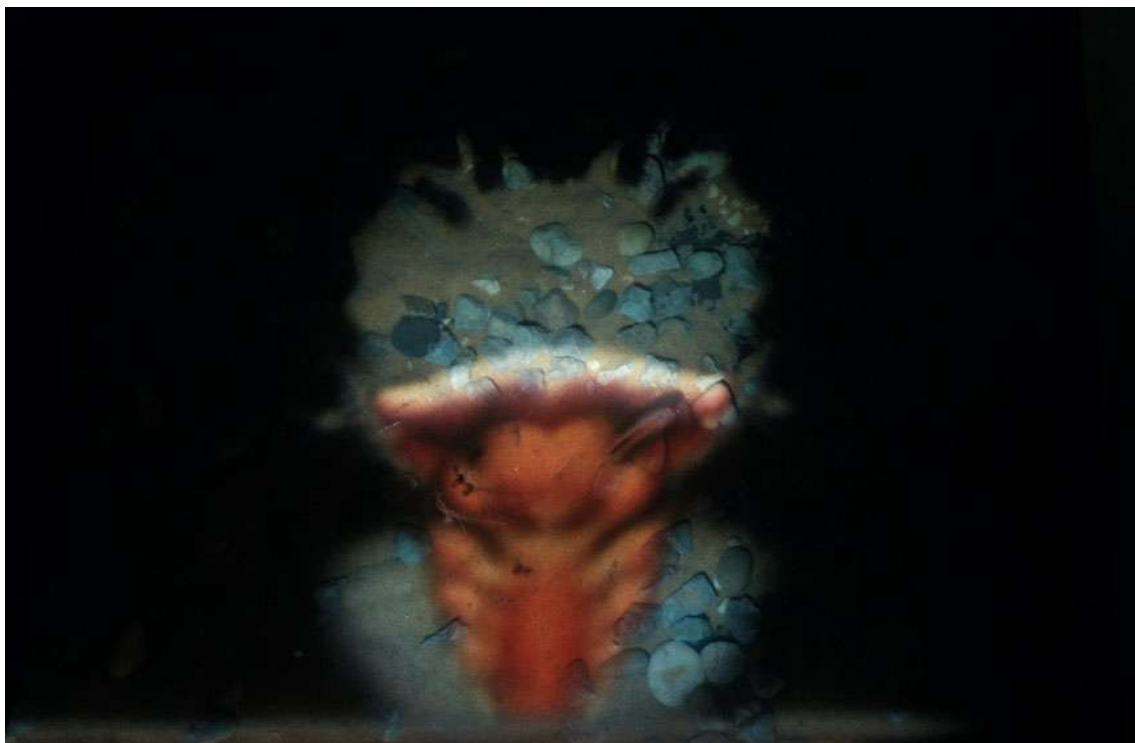


Figure 11. *Tears of blue* (2021), installation art. Rory Daniel. Photo by Ye Liu.

Ye Liu focused on the white pollution on the island and explored the series works *Floating in the blue* (2021) (Figure 12) in collaboration with the public. They picked up the bottles and plastics wastes on the beach and then use cyanotype techniques to create art printing pieces that depict the scene of waste in the sea. These works are educational and critical that rise public concerns and have an alerting meaning. Artists transformed their art into a power to create against indifference and achieve more concerns about broader responsibilities.

Reminding about the harsh topics and realities was not the purpose, but rather to seek changes and build up new community connection from an ecological perspective. As participating artist Clara Chen (2021) explained, “although I acknowledged the pain and frustration of the contemporary world and constructed a whimsical posthuman scene of symbiosis in *Posthuman Convergence* (2021) (Figure 12), my purpose is to induce empathy, care, understanding and response to the urgency in cultural and social changes”.



Figure 12. *Floating in the Bule* (2021), socially engaged art. Ye Liu. Photo by Ruijia Fan.



Figure 13. *Posthuman Convergence* (2021), installation art. Mee-Yee (Clara) Chen. Photo by Edward Lin.

Conclusion

Modernization has profoundly influenced rural society in China. It generates an enduring vision of social development and causes cultural dilemmas for today's China. In recent years, cultural tourism industries have been combined with rural regeneration, while the sudden industry transformation has rarely worked and even backfired. This paper investigates Huaniao Island, as an epitome of a traditional rural community in China, to explore the 'culture aphasia' phenomenon caused by tourism development. By reflecting on my residency and other artworks of the 2nd Huaniao Island International Public Art Festival, I reviewed the context of Huaniao Island development and the impact of the artists socially engaged practice during their residency. This approach effectively built intersubjective understanding because it brought artists and residents into an interactive situation based on contextual learning and embodied experiences. 'Inhabitation' is the method used to implement the artistic projects and explore how this action empowers the local community and seeks the encounters, associations, and interactions among humans, the environment, and society. In this experience, I learnt that cultural regeneration has two priorities: 'coming home' and 'becoming native', which ensure that the art production is local and responsive.

References

- Bennett, J. (2012) *Practical aesthetics: events, affects and art after 9/11*. London; New York: I.B. Tauris; New York.
- Bourriaud, N. (2002) *Nicolas Bourriaud: relational aesthetics*. Paris: Les Presses Du Réel.
- Chan, M.Y. (2021) Online studio course of Huaniao island presentation.
- Chan, M.Y. (2021) *Posthuman Convergence*, Huaniao Island, China.
- Daniel, R. (2021) *Tears of Blue*, Installation, Huaniao Island, China.
- Fan, R.J. (2021) *Tying Knots*, Installation, Huaniao Island, China.
- Fei, X. (2001) *From the soil: the foundations of Chinese society: a translation of Fei Xiaotong's Xiangtu Zhongguo*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). *The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place*. *Educational Researcher*, 32(4), pp. 3–12.
- Halbwachs, M. and Coser, L.A. (1992) *On collective memory*. Chicago University of Chicago Press.
- Kester, G. (2005) *Theories and methods of collaborative art practice. Groundworks: Environmental collaboration in contemporary art*. Pittsburgh: Regina Gouger Miller Gallery/Carnegie Mellon University, 18-35.
- Lim, Y.C., & Su, Y. (2021) *Family portrait project, participatory art project*, Huaniao Island, China.
- Lim, Y.C. (2021) *Online speaking of Huaniao Island international public art festival*.
- Papastergiadis, N., & Mosquera, G. (2014). *The Geopolitics of Contemporary Art*. [online] Available at: <https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/109> [Accessed 23 Jan. 2022].
- People's Government of Shengsi County (2021) *Censuses of Huaniao island* [online] Available at <http://www.shengsi.gov.cn/col/col1363206/index.html> [Accessed 23 Jan. 2022].
- Sun, D.C. (2021) *Opening of Huaniao Island international public art festival*.

Reinhabiting in Huaniao Island

- Sun, D.C. (2021) The word of flower, graffiti, Huaniao Island, China.
- Wang, Y. (2021) Daily Catch, Photography-based installation, Huaniao Island, China.
- Wu, X.W. (2021) To the lighthouse, installation, Huaniao Island, China.
- Ye, L. (2021) Floating in the blue, socially engaged art, Huaniao Island, China.
- Yu, S. (2015) Shen ti gan de zhuan xiang. Tai bei shi: Tai da chu ban zhong xin.
- Zhang, B., Xia, Q., & Luo, Y. (2021) Jiayuan - Chuantong chunluo de baohu he zhili [Homeland -- the protection and governance of traditional villages] Chengxiang Jianshe [Urban and rural development]. No.16, Vol.1.
- Zhang, R.H. (2021) Memory Preservation, installation art, Huaniao Island, China.

Finding Children of Compost Symbionts. An exploration of hopes and care in the damaged world

Clara M.Y. Chan

RMIT University, Australia

clarachan808@hotmail.com

Abstract

This project explores the use of simple craft techniques as resistance, and is a response to Haraway's call for "collaborative and divergent story-making practice" in her *Camille Stories: Children of Compost* (2016). I use compost as a figuration that articulates life in the damaged world. Living is composting. This project seeks to inspire curious and open thinking, and to build a "dialogical bridge between knowledge systems" (Rose, 2020). Through the agency of my Children of Compost Symbionts (an organism living in symbiosis with another), this project aims to engage the public in constructive public discourse in order to find hope, care and empathy in the broken world. The symbionts appropriate traditional handcrafted toys, like dolls and bears, and work in the way that psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott called "transitional objects" (Levy, 2021) work for children: they carry our anxieties, rage, love, and most secret thoughts, and live the life on our behalf. These whimsical symbionts inspire the public to tell their own stories of remediation and repair, encourage the public to create new perspectives and approaches, and engage with a multiplicity of otherness ethically.

Keywords: symbiont, craft, compost, care, empathy

To cite this article:

Chan, C. (2022) "Finding Children of Compost Symbionts: An exploration of Hopes and Care in the Damaged World", *The Journal of Public Space*, 7(3). pp. 117-130. doi: 10.32891/jps.v7i3.1589.

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



Figure 1: photograph taken at Mullum Mullum Reserve, Melbourne. Photo by author, 2020.

Introduction: Collaborative Story Making

This project emerged as a response to Donna Haraway's call for "collaborative and divergent story-making practice" (2016) amidst prevailing ecological problems. Environmental scientists like Gerardo Ceballos suggest we are entering the sixth mass extinction (2015). As ecological ethnographer Debroah Bird Rose claims "we are no longer in the position of being able to sustain the idea that humans are separate from nature" (2020). But how can we relinquish anthropocentrism, conjoin human and nonhuman, and identify alternative futures?

The first phase of this project started when the Covid-19 pandemic first hit Australia in 2020. I was then socially distanced from other human beings, but this opened a window for reconnecting with all other living beings around me. I hear them, feel them and love them, therefore must care for them. The desire to materialise "becoming-with all that is other-than-human" (Haraway, 2016) started the inception of my Children of Compost Symbionts. They were born to carry us into an exploration of love, care and hope in a world where Bios (life of humans) and Zoe (the non-human, vital force of life) can co-exist in a sustainable and just way. As stated by Braidotti (2019), Bios is regulated by sovereign powers and rules, whereas Zoe is unprotected and vulnerable. This journey started in my home studio with limited resources. I handmade doll-like symbionts that are part human and part nonhuman. My intention is that the human part of the symbiont is "materially embedded and embodied, differential, affective and relational" as Braidotti (2019) puts it.



Figure 2: Lichen Symbiont quilt and fruticose lichen collage, 2021. Lichen photos from open source.

The non-human part is vibrant and powerful. Together with my symbionts, I am interested in how we can creatively explore the potential for building a more just and sustainable way of life on a planet with finite resources and vitality through new symbiotic stories. Going into the second phase of this project, I incorporated lichen with animal cross human forms. As an exploration, the Children of Compost Symbionts take on many forms such as in the third phase of this project, I created a series of symbiont posters and tote bags, and later flags, quilts and video works, to raise awareness to environmental degradation, mass extinction, and climate change through these diverse public interventions. Throughout this ongoing project, I explore different possibilities of inspiring reflection and discourse on environmental and ecological justice through the agency of the symbionts.

First Generation Symbiont Team

These small experimental sculptures-symbionts articulate the relationship between human and non-human. In these soft sculptures that I call my Children of Compost Symbionts, I assembled elements from all beings around me, including human, flora and fauna into non-hierarchical entities. I constructed the symbionts to explore how an ethics of joy might conflate mutually exclusive/exhaustive binarizations, such as human/animal, mind/body, reason/passion, idea/passion and male/female. Such ethics refuse the normative and familiar, resisting being conflated with standards and “universal principles of thought and action” according to Grosz (2017). Additionally, through distorting the binaries, these symbionts carry us on a diffractive journey (a deviation in the direction) in search of new ethics, meanings and knowledge.



Figure 3: First Generation Symbiont Team, 2020, steel wire, fabric, feathers, dried wild flowers, polyester wadding, 1 x 46cm x 30cm x 19cm; 1 x 56cm x 14cm x 10cm; 1 x 45cm x 12 cm x 10cm; 1 x 46cm x 25cm x 25cm. Photo by author.

I started making the first-generation symbionts in the middle of the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 when public space was inaccessible, while anxiety, economic hardship, and social injustice dominated the public discourse. The poor must keep working under health threats while the privileged can isolate from infection. Escape from reality becomes a way to reflect and recoup in order to come back and improve the broken systems.



Figure 4 & 5 Photography taken at Mullum Mullum trail, Melbourne, Australia 2020. Photo by author.

Many contemporary artists are facilitating the escape for meaningful outcomes. The fantastic Yayoi Kusama, for example, is tirelessly bringing us to the infinite unbound universe and back. Artists like Raul De Nieves open the door of wonder and play with his shiny, bejewelled paintings and sculptures, while Cao Fei transports us to virtual

reality.¹ Accordingly, my whimsical symbionts inspire stories that transform anxiety and despair into new possibilities and new knowledge. With a background in fashion and textile technology, and a life-long love of making with my hands, sewing and embroidery naturally become my creative tools. What is traditionally considered women's craft in both western and eastern cultures turned into my best medium to dismantle traditional separations between fine art and craft, human and non-human, culture and nature, ecology and humanity. The time and effort put into my craft practice is a metaphor of love and care through which new perspectives and knowledge emerge.

I presented the first-generation symbionts along Mullum Mullum trail (a historical and nature-based walk in the outer eastern suburbs in Melbourne, Australia) as a public installation. These playful symbionts were predominately human, incorporating some elements from nature. Haraway (2008) observes that the "joy of play breaks rules to make something else happens." This small accomplishment in finding "joy of play" pushed me to carry this project forward until I had a breakthrough when I found lichen.

Lichen Symbionts

Lichen represents perfectly the movement within compost that involves trampling, inhaling, exhaling, making room and taking space. They are biological collaborations between a fungus and a photosynthetic organism, and they "render each other capable" (Haraway, 2016). Using lichen as the main body of the sculptures allows me to question "species hierarchy and Anthropocentric exceptionalism" (Braidotti, 2019) while suggesting a new way of posthuman thinking within affirmative ethics. Lichens are very sensitive to pollution and changes in temperature and humidity. Scientists have long been successfully using lichens as ecological indicators or environmental health thermometers. Through injecting this health indicator into my symbionts, I intend to inspire hope and the possibility of a sustainable future and become a force to reject dystopia.

Extinction Quilt

In this iteration I presented the lichen symbionts on a handmade *Extinction* quilt, on which names of extinct species in the last one hundred years are embroidered. Informed by textile works of Faith Ringgold, Gunes Terkol and Nilbar Gures, I stitched the name of extinct species on the quilt as protest, and applied the symbionts on the quilt as my resistance action in response to environmental degradation. The symbionts are far from being perfect or pretty. Their uneven limbs and disfigured bodies not only embodied our broken system but also embedded the art and beauty of "living with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016).

¹ Fei's documentary "Imirror" (2007) was filmed entirely in Second Life. Ferrando, Francesca. "A Feminist Genealogy of Posthuman Aesthetics in the Visual Arts." Palgrave communications 2, no. 1 (2016).



Figure 6: Extinction Quilt: Symbiosis and Metamorphoses, 2021, digital printed fabric, polyester wadding, and embroidery thread, 2 x 35cm x 47cm. Photo by author.



Figure 7: Extinction Quilt #3, 2021, fabric, polyester wadding, knitting yarn and acrylic paint, 120cm x 180cm. Photo by author.



Figure 8: Part of Extinction Quilt #3, 2021, 120cm x 180cm. Photo by author.

Climate Crisis Paste-up

In another iteration I created posters to reflect on the climate crisis to challenge and expand our ecological consciousness. I created the lichen symbionts to represent a positive relationship to the diversity of non-human life in a non-hierarchical manner, recognizing the respective degrees of intelligence, ability, and creativity of all organisms (Braidotti, 2019). Through juxtaposing the non-hierarchical symbionts with human-caused disastrous events, I intend to invite discourse around environmental justice and post-anthropocentrism.

To exemplify the urgent need for changes, I used 2019-20 Eastern Victorian bushfires and 2018-19 Murray-Darling basin fish death crisis as the backgrounds of the posters. By superposing the symbionts on top of the calamity, this cast a sense of hope and care in times of crisis. Finally, I changed the background images to black and white, signifying the historical implication of these events, which record the negative impacts of heedless human actions that upset the ecological balance.

Poster Totes

Referencing the "guerrilla kindness" of Sayraphim Lothian (2018), the symbiont posters were digitally printed on tote bags to be gifted away in the public area. These totes became mobile posters moving with the owners, and in return, the owners receive the service of storage and transport. What an excellent productive and co-constitutive relationship! The intrinsic down-to-earth nature of the tote bag carries the narrative further and broader into the public. It gently invades hearts and effortlessly generates discourse and reflection on human and non-human entanglement.

The tote gifting act happened at the intersection of Victoria Street and Cardigan Street in Carlton, an inner-city suburb of Melbourne, on June 2021. I wore a dress that said

Finding Children of Compost Symbionts

"care, Free, empathy" at the front, and printed "Adopt a symbiont poster tote, Free, please bring the symbiont to the public and transform the ruined universe by imagination and proposition of stories" at the back, while gifting totes to the public.



Figure 9: Climate Crisis Posters, 2021.



Figure 10: Tote gifting act, 2021 at Carlton, Australia. Photo by Billy Raffin.

“Instructions for public spaces....unusual times”, The Public Space Museum in Bologna, 2021.

My Children of Compost Symbionts travelled from Australia to Italy through the project “Instructions for public spaces....unusual times”. This project was a collaboration between the Public Space Museum, Bologna Italy, RMIT School of Art, Master of Arts – Art in Public Space, Melbourne, Australia and the London Metropolitan University’s Master of Public Art and Performance, UK. The concept was to create a Covid-19 response to public space in these unusual times through participating artists offering creative instructions to people.



Figure 11: Installation view of Instructions for public space...unusual times, 2021, Public Space Museum, Bologna, Italy, hosted by City Space Architecture. Photo by Luisa Bravo.

My climate crisis posters were part of the collective projection artwork at the central city Public Space Museum site in Bologna. The Public Space Museum is the first Italian research centre entirely dedicated to collaborative and transdisciplinary approach to public space practice, merging art, architecture and technology into a complex new discipline. The site itself merges exterior public space and the interior space of the museum through its glass interface.

Huaniao Island Public Art Festival Installation – *Finding Children of Compost*



Figure 12: Installation view on Huaniao Island, China, 2021. Source: Sherry Liu

From Italy to China and the Huaniao Island Public Art Festival 2021. Huaniao Island is a quiet and picturesque island approximately four hours by boat from Shanghai. It's small and aging community lives within a distinctive ecosystem and a traditional fishing culture undergoing social/economic changes brought about by the introduction of the tourist industry. The challenges imposed on environmental and cultural preservation are immanent. The rich ecosystem of the Zhoushan Archipelago, where Huaniao sits, houses many endangered species, namely the tree species *Carpinus Putoensis*.² This festival was a pilot project to engage artists and the public in creative placemaking to revitalize the culture and economy of this place.

² See <http://arbnet.org/integrated-conservation-unique-flora-zhoushan-archipelago-china>



Figure 13: Installation view on Huaniao Island, China, 2021. Photo by Sherry Liu.

I extended my Finding Children of Compost project into this art installation embedding the same concept of questioning anthropocentrism and the impacts of advanced capitalism within it. I installed a group of vibrant flags with whimsical symbionts printed on them. The flags were animated by wind blowing from the sea. Eight colourful flags were installed along the seashore line. Another five flags sat a bit lower on the boats behind the front row of flags. They gave audiences a closer encounter with the symbionts. I mixed Zhoushan Archipelago-specific species with indigenous Australian elements to build the Huaniao symbiont league. The intention was to welcome and introduce Huaniao Island visitors to a non-hierarchical multispecies encounter. The work aimed to provoke the sense of wonder that dissipates boundaries and stands to build relationships, incite collective thinking in nature/culture preservation, and inspire systematic changes in the current time of the Anthropocene.

Posthuman Confluence Installation

After the Huaniao Island project, my next installation artwork consisting of three extinction quilts, crocheted lichens, and a short video forms a summary of earlier iterations of the Children of Compost Symbionts. Extinction quilts from a previous project are re-made into two full-size single bed quilts, and a plain quilted panel as a video screen. At the centre of the installation, a video tells the story of my resonance with microbes, mushrooms, and kitchen tools. Through preparing a meal with the lichen and mushroom, I aim to articulate my integrated relationship with other species and matters. I put on the lichen gloves to represent my symbiotic relationship with all the microbes inside me. This relationship is complicated; some microbes make me sick, but most of the time, the microbes provide vital functions essential for my survival. One of

the essential partnerships is food consumption, an important part of the ecosystem. Through the performance, I aspire to tell the story of a partnership (between all-other-beings and me) based on mutual respect and understanding by making a meal with mushroom, lettuce, capsicum, lemon, oil, knife, fork, bowls, and plates. My respect and care towards these non-human partners are projected through my body movement and the food presentation.



Figure 14: Installation view at Mullum Mullum trail, Melbourne, 2021. Photo by author.

This artwork was set up in outdoor public parkland filled with gumtrees, native grass, flowers, clear air, soft breeze, birds, insects, rabbits, koalas, possums, and human passers-by. The quilts were animated by nature through the wind and by songs of birds. My Children of Compost Symbionts invited all Bios and Zoë to join, telling their stories, rediscovering the connection with each other, and finding meanings in the entanglement. I sum up this work with Braidiotti's (2019) words: *"What is inexhaustible is the potential that all living organisms share for multiple actualizations of yet unexplored interconnections, across and with human and non-human."*

Going Forward

The relationship between human and non-human is complex and dynamic. To articulate this relationship, I use needles, threads, fabric, and simple craft techniques to construct my whimsical Children of Compost Symbionts; and then deploy them to inspire creative

story making, to facilitate constructive public discourse, to raise awareness to environmental degradation, mass extinction, and climate change, and to encourage new perspectives and knowledge.

Lichen was used as the main element of the symbionts to signify human “becoming-with all that is other-than-human” (Haraway, 2016). The symbionts progressively embed and embody more elements from the universe with every additional artwork being made. The connection between humans and other beings is neither linear nor limited. The more I work on this project, the more lives and matters I discover and re-discover. I have told my love stories with non-human through the symbionts and will continue to work with the symbionts to inspire the public to create new possibilities of co-existence with all-other-beings.

References

- Alaimo, S. (2016) *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bolt, B. (2010) ‘The artist in a post-human world’ in *Heidegger Reframed: Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Braidotti, R. (2019) *Posthuman Knowledge*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Ceballos, G., Ehrlich, P. R., Barnosky, A. D., García, A., Pringle R. M., and Palmer, T. M. (2015) “Accelerated Modern Human-Induced Species Losses: Entering the Sixth Mass Extinction.” *Science advances* 1, no. 5 (2015): e1400253-e1400253.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rose, Deborah Bird. (2020) “The Ecological Humanities”. *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene*. Baltimore, Maryland: Project Muse.
- Geerts, E. and Carstens, D. (2019) “Ethico-onto-Epistemology.” *Philosophy today (Celina)* 63, no. 4, 915–925.
- Grosz, E. (2008) *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Grosz, E. (2017) *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics and the Limits of Materialism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Grieves, C. “Lichens and the health of ecosystems”. *Journal of British Ecological Society*. <https://www.britishecologicalsociety.org/lichens-global-ecological-indicator>.
- Gilbert, S. F., Sapp, J., & Tauber, A. I. (2012) Tauber “A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals.” *Quarterly Review of Biology* 87, no. 4.
- Haraway, D. (2003) *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.
- Haraway, D. (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Haraway, D. (2008) *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Karkulehto, Sanna, Aion-Kaisa Koistinen et al. (2020) *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Kirksey, E. (2015) *Emergent Ecologies*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Levy, D. (2021) “Lord of the Flies”. *Frieze*, no. 219.
- Lothian, S. (2018) *Guerrilla Kindness & Other Acts of Creative Resistance: Making a Better World through Craftivism*. FL: Mango Publishing Group.

Finding Children of Compost Symbionts

- Mitchell, W.J.T., (ed.) (1990) *Art and The Public Sphere*. Chicago, USA: the University of Chicago.
- Moffitt, E. (2021) "Raul De Nieves." *Frieze*, no. 219.
- Shaw, E. (2017) "Symbiotic Relationships Between Trees & Lichens". *Sciencing* (last updated July 21, 2017). <https://sciencing.com/symbiotic-relationships-between-trees-lichens-12593213.html>
- Wright, K. "Becomings", *The Multispecies Salon*. <https://www.multispecies-salon.org/becomings>
- Zebracki, M., and Cartiere, C. (2016) *The Everyday Practice of Public Art: Art, Space and Social Inclusion*. London: Routledge.

Evocations. Honouring the Memory of Women Artists

Cynthia Granados Posada

RMIT University, Australia

art@cynthiagp.com

Abstract

The life and work of women artists has been, more often than not, neglected and excluded from history. There are artists, groups, authors and institutions around the world who have made and continue to make efforts to shed light on excluded artists by showing their work in exhibitions, compilations, websites or social media accounts. The ongoing project *Evocations* aims to honour some of those forgotten artists through the creation of artwork inspired by them. Until now, this project has consisted of four participatory public performance art pieces and a collective exhibition honouring eleven women artists who have not been properly recognised for their achievements. By undertaking these participatory performances in public space locations, the art, ideas and lives of these women are drawn into the daily life of contemporary Mexico.

Keywords: women artists, feminism, art, public performance, Mexico

To cite this article:

Granados Posada, C. (2022) "Evocations: Honouring The Memory of Women Artists", *The Journal of Public Space*, 7(3). pp. 131-142. doi: 10.32891/jps.v7i3.1590.

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Introduction

The systematic erasure of women and their contributions in all areas of life is an issue that continues to occupy debate worldwide. But it is usually put in the spotlight by other women who create exhibitions, seminars, websites, maps and a wide array of publications. There is still so much work to be done to give women the place they deserve in history and in the contemporary art world.

The ways women have been excluded from the art world have varied. To summon just a few examples: male artist groups who obstruct women's work like the Mexican muralist Maria Izquierdo; husbands who appropriate their wife's creations like the painter Margaret Keane or writer Colette; other husbands who feel threatened by a woman's talent, like Elena Garro's, forcing her to burn her writing; women who, for fear of not being published or shown in exhibitions, had to change their names or use only their initials, like the now justly recognised writer Joanne Kathleen Rowling. As Virginia Woolf noted in *A Room of One's Own*: "I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman" (Woolf, 1929, p. 51). In 1950, Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos wondered in her thesis *On Feminine Culture* if women produce their own culture, if it is different from that of men, and if not, what are the reasons. She observed that the world of culture was closed for women, because "its inhabitants are all of male sex" (Castellanos, 2005, p.22). It has been historically such a difficult world to trespass for women, that she refers as smugglers to those who have been able to get in, like Safo, Santa Teresa, Virginia Woolf or Gabriela Mistral. She could later count herself into that outstanding smugglers' list.

Almost two decades later, the American poet and feminist activist Robin Morgan coined the term Herstory, to "emphasize that women's lives, deeds, and participation in human affairs have been neglected or undervalued in standard histories" (Women's Media Center, no date), drawing attention to the fact that the official history has been mostly written by men, registering only what they have considered of value and not taking into account most of women's contributions in any realm of life. This also becomes clear in Linda Nochlin's essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1971), where she questions why women are not usually found in catalogues, exhibitions, books and other ways of preserving the memory of humanity.

While these examples are in the past, many exhibitions in the present still include far more men than women, except when they are devoted exclusively to women's work. For example, in 2016 the Carrillo Gil Museum in Mexico City organised the exhibition *Exploratory Exercises 2. Contemporary Creators in the MACG Collection*, which occupied one floor of the building with work made by women. However, in the rest of the exhibitions there were barely a couple of women included. What is the point of making women visible in the arts as a theme if we continue to not be taken into account as creators in the normal context? These exclusive exhibitions are of no use if they don't help create real awareness of how women have been historically excluded and continue to be. In this regard, the Australian feminist Germaine Greer's words in *The Obstacle Race* (1979) still ring true that books and exhibitions dedicated to women are usually done in a condescending tone, without a deep study of the creators and their context.

Shed light on each other

Nowadays in Mexico, women are a majority in art schools, but a minority in exhibitions. According to data from 2017, in the National Autonomous University of Mexico women were 65% in the art and design schools, but only 40% of the work shown in the main museums in Mexico were made by women (CIEG, 2017).

There are, however, some institutions that are addressing the issue. For example, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington has had a campaign since 2017 in which they ask people if they can name five women artists (National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2017). Most people are able to immediately mention Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keefe in second place, and only a few get past that point, making evident how little the general public knows about this subject. The museum also created the #5womenartists with the intention of spreading the campaign through social media. In view of the generally discouraging panorama, many artists have decided to create their own spaces and organisations in order to make themselves present outside the patriarchal artistic system that takes so little account of them.

In the 70's, feminist artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro were founders of the California Institute of the Arts Feminist Art Program and created Womanhouse, an installation and performance space dedicated to women's art. Judy Chicago, with the help of many other women, created *The Dinner Party* (1979) installation, a room-size triangular table displaying ceramic plates and tablecloths in honour of 1038 women of history. Now, in her older age, Judy Chicago is a well celebrated feminist artist and *The Dinner Party* is permanently on show at the Brooklyn Museum, New York which shows a growing interest and recognition of women's art in society. A less known precursor of this ground-breaking work was Virginia Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell, who painted *Famous Women Dinner Service*, 50 plates with the portraits of important women in history. Mary Beth Edelson in *Some Living American Women Artists* (1972) used Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* to create a collage with 80 women artists alive at the time, making them visible and celebrating them.

The activist collective Guerrilla Girls carry out exhaustive research on the situation of women in the arts. For example, their poster *Do women have to be naked to enter the Met?* (1989) criticised the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York where from the art on show, women were found almost exclusively as nude models in art made by men, but rarely did they appear as authors. Sadly, even today the Guerrilla Girls continue to draw attention to ongoing inequities in the arts.

In Mexico, Monica Mayer's Pinto Mi Raya (I Paint My Line) art archive, the online women's museum MUMA Museo de Mujeres, the exhibition series Mujeres Mirando Mujeres (Women Looking At Women), Colectivo Nopalitos fanzines, Mala Fanzine, Mujeres Vinileras dj collective, the instagram account Ellas Artes, Mujeres Artistas (Them Arts, Women Artists), Circulo Literario de Mujeres (Women's Literary Circle), Tejiendo Redes en Teatro (Weaving Nets in Theatre) and Colectivo Habitación Propia (Own Room Collective), are just a handful of examples of self-managed artistic projects that aim to spread the creations and skills of women artists.



Figure 2. *Evocations*: Andrea Villarreal, 2017.



Figure 3. *Evocations*: Andrea Villarreal, 2017.

The participative performance invited the attendants, mostly women, to put on a mask to embody Andrea's spirit, write on a piece of paper what they thought was the revolution Mexico needs now, and throw it to a bullseye with a slingshot made of

Evocations

clothespins. We decided to use these materials related to housework to allude to the so-called “women’s work”, that artists like Andrea were able to challenge, demonstrating their capability as women goes far beyond house chores. Being this an academic event, we were hoping our invitation to participate in the performance would not be rejected, and we were happily surprised to see that many women of different ages were eager to take part in the action.

Pita

The second performance for *Evocations* was about Guadalupe Amor, best known as Pita Amor, a Mexican poet who lived from 1918 to the year 2000. Although her poetry was recognised and celebrated during her life and after, in her old age she was constantly ridiculed for being rude to people and dressing extravagantly and was especially recognised for wearing big flowers on her head. I was invited to create a performance for the celebration of the centenary of her birth at *Un Paseo por los Libros* (A Stroll Through Books), a long hallway that connects two of the main subway stations in the centre of Mexico City and is home to dozens of bookshops and public cultural activities.



Figure 4. *Evocations: Pita Amor*, 2018. Photo by Victor Sandoval.

The performance focuses on Pita’s first poem *I am my own home* (1945), which she said to have written with an eyeliner on a napkin after arriving home from a party at the age of 27. In this poem she portrays her sadness and anxiety inside a “round house” of “round loneliness”. Using the napkin and the round shape as references for the performance, I wrote each stanza of the poem on a napkin and placed them on the floor forming a circle around me.



Figure 5 - 6. *Evocations: Pita Amor*, 2018. Photo by Victor Sandoval.

I invited passers-by to step into the circle with me one person at a time, I took one of the napkins, read the stanza aloud and folded it to form a flower which I gave to the person to take away. This way, I was dissolving Pita's round loneliness by sharing her poem with others. The performance ended with the last napkin left on the floor as a shrine, along with a natural flower that I wore in my hair.

This being such a public space where people are usually in a rush, I thought it would be harder to draw an audience's attention. However, it was interesting to see the reactions: people staying close by to see what was happening but not too close so they would be called to participate, some that later decided to approach the action, others who were passing quickly but came to me without hesitating when I called them with a gesture of my hand and left as quick as they arrived after participating, and a lovely lady who I didn't realise wanted to be called and didn't approach me until her friend told me about her and I invited her in. These are the interactions that I most value from my performances in public space, when I am able to interrupt people's daily routine with something that surprises them, makes their day different and maybe leaves them thinking about what just happened.

Frida

For Frida Kahlo's birth anniversary in 2021 I created a performance inspired by the corset she had to wear throughout her life after the serious tram accident she suffered when she was 18 years old. While Kahlo is well known, it can be argued that she is viewed as a less important artist than her famous husband Diego Rivera.

Corset was also a participative performance, touching on the different uses and meanings of this item. It was presented at the open-air cinema at the Parque Hundido park in Mexico City, before the projection of the 1983 Mexican movie *Frida, Naturaleza Viva* (*Frida, Living Nature*). I made three different corsets: the medical, made of bandages, the restrictive elegance made of shiny fabrics and the patriarchal gaze made of paper *mache* with eyes drawn on it – which I wore one on top of the other. The action consisted of taking each of the corsets off and giving the pieces to the women in the

Evocations

audience, following the soundtrack of different women saying words related to the corsets.



Figure 7. *Corset*, 2021. Photo by Lizette Abraham.



Figure 8 - 9. *Corset*, 2021. Photo by Lizette Abraham.

The last piece of clothing under the corsets referred to freedom. It had Frida's painting *Xochitl, Flower of Life* (1938) printed on it and 8 artificial red flowers. I chose 8 women from the audience, took them on the stage with me and gave them each a flower while saying "thank you" to them. It was important for me in this action to connect in the end with other women, as to recognise and set us free from the pain we go through because of the gender stereotypes imposed on us from the moment we are born.

Annette

Evocations started as an individual project but was later done with the Colectivo Habitación Propia (Own Room Collective), including myself and seven other artists.



Figure 10. *Evocations* by Colectivo Habitación Propia, 2021.

Photographer Lizette Abraham chose to honour playwright and puppeteer Mireya Cueto (1922-2013), painter Laura Aranda did a portable mural about poet and muralist Aurora Reyes (1908-1985), Graciela Robles, who creates wire sculptures, made one inspired by Cordelia Urueta's (1908-1995) paintings, illustrator Gabriela Colmenero honoured painter Susana Sierra (1942-2017), painter Fernanda Reyna did etchings inspired by monumental sculptress and arts manager Helen Escobedo (1934-2010), Radharani Torres created a live action work about Estrella Carmona's (1962-2011) murals and the music she liked and printmaker Diana Suarez created etchings in honour of sculptress Naomi Siegmänn (1933-2018).

In my case, almost by luck I came across Annette Nancarrow thanks to getting a job managing a new artist residency in the house that she built in Mexico City. Annette was born in New York in 1907, studied arts in Hunter College and The University of Columbia and became a painter, muralist and jewellery maker. After visiting Mexico in 1935 she decided to move to this country the year after.

I was very fortunate to meet Annette's son Luis Stephens and daughter-in-law Karen de Luca, who showed me her artwork and told me about her life. One particular anecdote caught my interest: she was the first woman to have a solo show at the prestigious Galería de Arte Mexicano (Gallery of Mexican Art) in 1947, where she suffered a bad

experience, the details are unknown, but it caused her to decide never to exhibit in Mexico again.

My performance titled *A Necklace for Annette* is a ritual piece to symbolically heal Annette's wounds. I wondered what could have happened to her and pondered about all the obstacles that women face in the art world only for being women. With this question I interviewed artists and arts managers in Mexico and New York, confirming that most of us have experienced some kind of discrimination, harassment or patronising attitudes while trying to make our way in the arts. I composed a soundtrack out of the most relevant phrases from the interviews, which played during the performance.

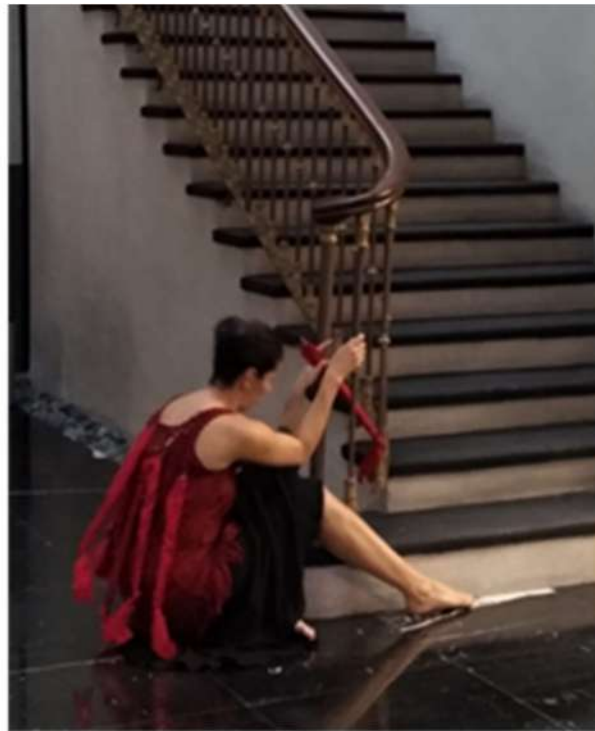


Figure 11. *A Necklace for Annette*, 2021. Photo by Gabriela Colmenero.

In her paintings Annette recurrently portrayed bulls and bullfighters, so in the performance I appear with wooden sticks covered in red fabric hanging from my back, referring to a bull that has been hurt by the bullfighter's banderillas.

The action starts with me walking heavily through the space, trying to take off the banderillas and approaching some members of the audience for help. After I have them all in my hands, I peel off the red fabric from them revealing decorations with bright coloured jewellery and craft materials, as an alchemical act to transform pain into beauty. I tie up all the red pieces of fabric to create a rope and hang the banderillas on it. I put it on as a necklace while I look into a mirror with the shape of Annette's bust – with her characteristic short curly hair –, as a sign of support to her and all the women artists going through rough times. I leave the necklace on the mirror to create the final altar and walk away.



Figure 12 - 13. A Necklace for Annette, 2021. Photo by Victor Sandoval.

Evocations is an ongoing project that aims to give voice to and honour female artists, not only by sharing the work they did but through the work of contemporary creators who are also building our place in the art world, both in public space and galleries. Our ancestors inspire us to stay on track. Hopefully one day these rescue exercises will no longer be necessary, when the artists who have remained in the shadows receive the recognition they deserve.

References

- Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios de Genero (CIEG), *Boletin Numeros y Genero #14* (2017)
Available at <https://tendencias.cieg.unam.mx/boletin-14.html> (Accessed 25 January 2022).
- Castellanos, R. (2005) *Sobre Cultura Femenina (On Feminine Culture)*, Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Economica.
- Circulo Literario de Mujeres (Women's Literary Circle) <https://circuloliterariodemujeres.com/>
- Colectivo Habitacion Propia (Own Room Collective)
<https://www.instagram.com/colectivohabitacionpropia/>
- Colectivo Nopalitos <https://www.instagram.com/colectivonopalitos/>
- Ellas Artes, Mujeres Artistas (Them Arts, Women Artists)
<https://www.instagram.com/ellas.artes/>
- Greer, G. (1979) *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work*, New York City: Farrar, Stratus, Giroux.
- Mala Fanzine <https://www.instagram.com/mala.fanzine/>
- Mujeres Mirando Mujeres (Women Looking At Women) <https://mujeresmirandomujeres.com/>
- Mujeres Vinileras (Vinyl Women dj's) <https://www.instagram.com/mujeresvinileras/>
- MUMA Museo de Mujeres (Women's Museum) <https://www.museodemujeres.com/es/>
- National Museum of Women in the Arts (2017) *Frida On The Streets: Can You Name #5WomenArtists?* 24 March. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JspTwUzqwXU> (Accessed: 10 December 2021).

Evocations

Nochlin, L. (1971) *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* Available at https://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Nochlin-Linda_Why-Have-There-Been-No-Great-Women-Artists.pdf (Accessed 15 January 2022).

Pinto Mi Raya (I Paint My Line) <https://www.pintomiraya.com/>

Tejiendo Redes en Teatro (Weaving Nets in Theatre)
<https://www.facebook.com/tejiendoredes.escenicas/>

Woolf, V. 1929, *A Room of One's Own*, London: The Hogarth Press.

Women's Media Center. *Unspinning The Spin*. Available at <https://womensmediacenter.com/unspinning-the-spin/herstory> (Accessed 20 January 2022).

ACT_VISION.

Inspiring Change and Acts of Creative Visioning

Emma Anna

RMIT University, Australia

emma_anna_chatter@hotmail.com

Abstract

This paper takes the form of personal memoir as a reflection on art in the public domain and a means by which to re-tell the conceptual development and evolution of *IMAG_NE*, a concrete poem and public sculpture. The concept was first developed for my Masters of Arts (Art in Public Space) at RMIT University. Initially an aid to assist my own personal creative evolution, the artwork has now toured as an ephemeral installation to communities across Australia, New Zealand, Europe and the United States of America and has been widely used as a tool to promote community initiatives and collective visioning. Joseph Beuys's theories of a "social sculpture" are drawn upon as a conceptual framework to underpin *IMAG_NE* and its agenda to promote individual and societal change. The power of the human imagination is evoked in an ongoing conference with a broad range of sites, communities and individuals. The impact of *IMAG_NE* is demonstrated through key examples including its appearance at numerous large public sculpture festivals and significant cultural sites. Recent developments surrounding the work's presence in the Central Coast community of New South Wales, Australia, provides further evidence of the work's importance and impact, and motivation for the continuation of the project into the post-Covid 19 pandemic era.

Keywords: social sculpture, Beuys, concrete poetry, public art, memoir

To cite this article:

Anna, E. (2022) "ACT_VISION. Inspiring Change and Acts of Creative Visioning", *The Journal of Public Space*, 7(3). pp. 143-156. doi: 10.32891/jps.v7i3.1593.

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



Figure 1. Emma Anna *IMAG_NE*. Image courtesy of Sculpture by the Sea Inc. Copyright Jamie Williams, 2008. www.sculpturebythesea.com

IMAG_NE is a concrete poem and public artwork that was conceived in 2007 during my studies for a Masters of Art (Art in Public Space) at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia (Figure 1). It has since become a social sculpture project that is in part inspired by the theories of German artist, activist and academic, Joseph Beuys. The story of the artwork and its many adventures and incarnations runs in parallel to the narrative of my life over the past fifteen years and is interwoven in the many changes and challenges that have emerged during this time. Like me, *IMAG_NE* continues to mature and evolve, gathering new depth and helping to provide insights into creativity and existence. While now well-known as a public artwork that resonates on different levels for many people and diverse publics, at its core *IMAG_NE* is a personal work, one that contains echoes of my personal history, relationships and career development. Recalling the evolution of the work must therefore take the shape of memoir, a process that sets this paper outside the domain of strict academic inquiry, and more strongly aligns it towards reflection upon the “I” / me / individual that is exulted by the artwork itself. Such a

reflection plays out in the public domain as a reminder of the public as a collective of individuals.

IMAG_NE was initially created as a collage (Figure 2), and the individual letters of the poem were made up of photocopied Scrabble letter pieces with the second 'I' piece removed. These letters were stuck on top of a copy of J.R. Eyerman's image of a crowd wearing 3D glasses inside the Paramount Theater in Hollywood, an image that I found reproduced on the cover of the 1983 English edition of *La Société du Spectacle* (The Society of the Spectacle) Guy Debord's seminal analysis of consumer capitalism in the late 20th century.



Figure 2. Emma Anna *IMAG_NE*, paper collage on photocopy, 21cm x 25cm, 2007.

The collage had been made in response to developments in my life at the time, when I was seeking clarity about leaving my managerial role in corporate design and communications and wishing to pursue independent creative practice. I read the missing “I” piece as a gateway through which I would pass as part of this evolution of self, with the presence of absence acting as a portal of opportunity, in a manner that was similar to that offered by a blank canvas. It functioned as an affirmation of sorts - a doorway into an unknown and yet to be defined future in which anything and everything was possible. I believe that this is how it continues to be interpreted by those who have seen and experienced the three-dimensional public interpretation of this initial collage concept sketch. The intimate interweaving of my personal narrative is somewhat unknown to the general public, and does not impact upon the reading of the work. However, clues to the personal footnotes are revealed through anagrams that can be made from the letter of *IMAG_NE* - *GAMINE* and *ENIGMA* and *IN GAME* (Figures 3 - 5).



Figure 3. *ENIG_MA*; Figure 4. *GAMI_NE*; Figure 5. *IN GAME* / All Emma Anna, digital collage, dimensions variable, 2008.

The gap in *IMAG_NE* was also intended as a reference to Yoko Ono's 1971 paper postcard work *A Hole to See the Sky Through* that evokes notes of the positivity and possibility that are atypical of Ono's practice and that have re-emerged throughout the artist's career in works such as *Sky TV* (1966) and *To See the Sky* (2015). At the time *IMAG_NE* was emerging as a concept, my research had been exploring the work of activist artists such as Ono (and consequently the work of her third husband, John Lennon). I was also drawn to and intrigued by the ideas, multiples and performance artworks of Joseph Beuys. I was curious as to how all three artist / activists used the media as a tool to promote public dialogue, activating the audiences they had attained through fame (or notoriety) to promote the peace movement and environmentalism. The work of this trio convinced me of the role of artist as an agent for social change. Performance and protest were employed by all three as creative, expressive acts with an agenda to promote varying degrees of non-violent yet fundamental political, social, economic and ecological change.

At the same time as I was undertaking this research, I had begun my own personal transformation, adopting the name 'Emma Anna'. I believed that performing this character would allow me to transcend my previous life as a corporate creative, and to overcome my relative shyness through the acting out of Emma Anna's life. Drawing upon my communications and media background, the character of Emma Anna first came to life online in the social media platform of the era - MySpace - where my profile made use of imagery such as game and puzzle motifs. The Queen chess piece

was often referenced in this work and presented as the ultimate feminist role model, able to move anywhere on the board. The game playing board was perceived as a sort of world map, with the Queen piece being able to move in whatever direction she desired (Figure 6). I found this sense of movement repeated in the Scrabble board (Figure 7) and via my exploration of Chaos Magic (Figure 8). This work was included in documentation submitted to RMIT University as part of my Masters' research, the cover of which featured a concrete poem of a dissected compass (Figure 9) in which I defined a fragmentation, almost crucifixion, of self.

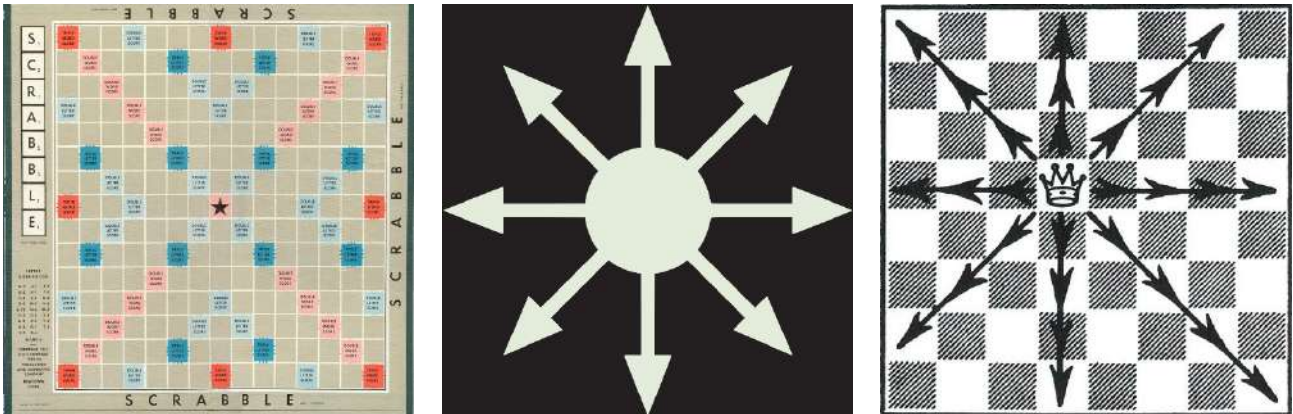


Figure 6. Queen Chess piece; Figure 7. Scrabble playing board; Figure 8. Chaos Magic sigil. All found imagery from Emma Anna development at www.myspace.com, circa 2007.

It was not until early 2008 that I conceived of the idea to make *IMAG_NE* in three-dimensional form, and for Emma Anna to similarly come to life as a performance in the “real-world”. The opportunity to do so came through Sculpture by the Sea (SXS), a large outdoor exhibition of over 100 one hundred sculptures and installation works that is staged on the spectacular Bondi to Tamarama coastal walk-in eastern Sydney, Australia each year. The idea of *IMAG_NE* having the potential to activate social sculpture was one of the motivations that led me to propose it for inclusion in the exhibition. Having harnessed the power of *IMAG_NE* to activate my personal transformation into Emma Anna, I hoped that it could work for other people in similar evocative ways, to promote thinking, critique, inspiration and to fire up the power of the human imagination. My artist statement in the exhibition catalogue declared, “imagination affords us poetic sanctuary in an often-hostile world” (SXS, 2008). Despite the relative simplicity of *IMAG_NE*'s supporting structure and letter forms, the processes of making and installing the piece for its initial exhibition at SXS provided many new challenges, including the idea of installing the work on the edge of an elevated cliff above a pathway. This position perfectly aligned the word / work with the horizon line of the Pacific Ocean and the sky. The limitless potential of the human imagination was evoked by this site, and was part of its ultimate success and the public's appreciation of the work in this first setting. On a very limited budget, and a steep learning curve, I was overwhelmed to be announced the winner of the Art Gallery of NSW's Site-Specific Prize at the exhibition opening, for the project to receive extensive

press coverage, an outpouring of feedback and appreciation from the public audience, and later, invitations to exhibition the artwork at Sculpture by the Sea Cottesloe (Western Australia, March 2009) and Sculpture by the Sea Aarhus (Denmark, June 2009).

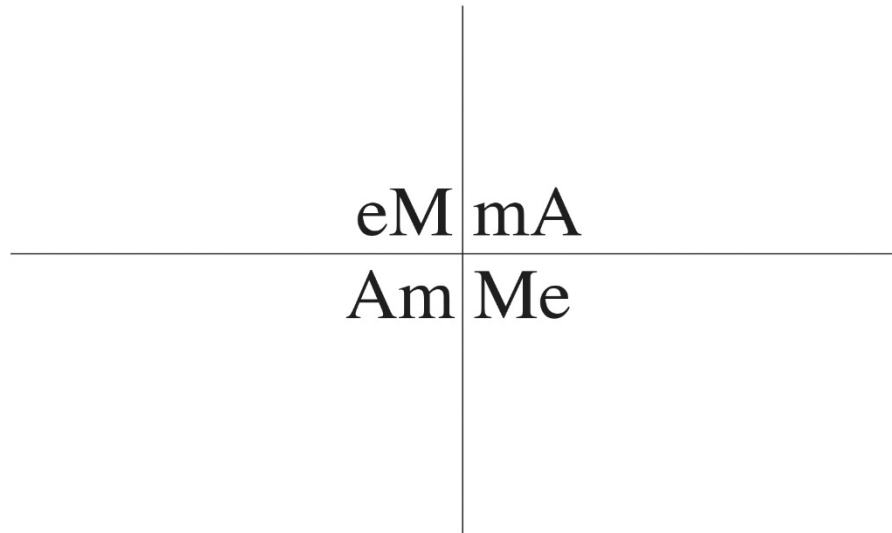


Figure 9. Emma Anna, eM / Ma / Am / Me cover to tangible visual record submitted to RMIT University MA (Art in Public Space) program, 2007.

I spent a large part of 2009 with the work in Denmark where it was one of several Australian works presented as part of the inaugural SXS exhibition. A European version of the Australian show had been commissioned by the Danes as a means of uniting the cultures of Denmark and Australia as a tribute to the Australian-born Crown Princess Mary. Following the conclusion of the show, and the acquisition of *IMAG_NE* by a local collector, I spent several months in Germany where I was able to observe many of Beuys works in person, notably the outstanding collection of the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin.

Beuys theories around social sculpture, along with his crafting and distribution of multiples, aligned with my thinking about how *IMAG_NE* could be used to promote individual, collective and ultimately societal change. For Beuys social sculpture was “predicated on a process of self-transformation: all individuals should see themselves as artists, shaping their loves according to the principles of sculpture in order to renew society from the ground up”. Further, “the creative capacities and the unconditional freedom inherent in human thought are at the heart of his expanded concept of art” (Gaensheimer et al, p. 14). Beuys created art for philosophical analysis, for education, for ethical guidance and perhaps for spiritual evolution. “Through his work and deeds, Beuys radically expanded the concept of art by linking it with all processes in society, because to him everyone was an artist. All individuals were called upon to place their own creative powers at the service of society... creative abilities were the real capital that would bring about a community of people working toward the common good” (Laschet in Gaensheimer et al, p. 11). Beuys’s ideas around the notion of “social sculpture” and “the wound”, have all been considerations of my own determining

of - and activity to correct - a fundamental sickness that I believe is a trait of contemporary capitalistic societies. Ultimately Beuys was motivated by a deep-seated sense of responsibility for humanity; “I have come to the conclusion that there is no other possibility to do something for man (sic) other than through art”.

Beuys made great use of “the multiple” as a form by which to spread his message. Works such as *Capri Battery* (1985) and *Felt Suit* (1970) allowed collectors to possess a physical manifestation of Beuys’s thinking that act, in many ways, as talismans. *IMAG_NE* also works as a multiple, a status attained through the multiple representations of the work that have been derived from in situ photography and the consequent distribution of this imagery via online social media platforms. Over many installations (perhaps more than 100 different sites over its almost fifteen-year history), *IMAG_NE* has expanded its impact via an archive of online memories uploaded by its public audiences. It is captured, souvenired, reviewed and used to enrich individual lives outside and beyond the initial engagement with the physical work (Figures 10 and 11).



Figure 10. *IMAG_NE* in situ at Federation Square, Melbourne, 2009 / Photography Emma Anna.

Figure 11. *IMAG_NE* in situ at the National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2015. Image courtesy of National Library of Australia.

Many people who have experienced the work have contacted me to express how important it feels to them, and have placed their record of connection with the work in personal shrines, on fridge doors, and in workspaces. In more than one instance I have been approached for permission for the word / work to be tattooed onto a person’s body. *IMAG_NE* initially drew upon my experience creating within social media, in MySpace. It emerged in tandem with Facebook’s great growth period and reached a new level of multiplicity via the sharing of imagery of the work on Instagram, and the ubiquitous smart phone technology that has radically evolved in the fifteen years since the work first appeared. Photography of *IMAG_NE* and the public sharing of imagery on social media has taken on the form of a memory making multiple, an expansion of Beuys’s ideas in the era of digital information technologies. Like Beuys, I find this power of expanded messaging beyond a singular object important to my work. As Beuys

explained in relation to his multiples, *“I m interested in the distribution of physical vehicles in the forms of editions because I m interested in spreading ideas”*.¹

Following Beuys’s definition of social sculpture, the act of thinking becomes a creative and potentially revolutionary act. The change and awareness that Beuys desired could be activated by the creative processes of the individual mind, *“thinking is not only the world-knowing but also the world-creating principle”* (Gaensheimer et al, p. 120). *IMAG_NE* seeks to activate the potential for social sculpture in exactly the same way. The experience of viewing the work translates into a process that activates the imagination; it is an unavoidable consequence of viewing an artwork that also functions as a concrete poem. The occupation of the missing “I” spot by the physical body, is proof that the more conceptual aspects of this work – the implication of the power of the individual to affect personal and collective transformation – have been understood and appreciated, at least to some degree, by the public. *IMAG_NE* is a small mark in a bigger picture. As Suzanne Lacy states, *“social change doesn’t happen through a single person (in general), and it certainly doesn’t happen through a single art project. It happens through collective activity of many, many people working in many ways to push the ball up the hill in the same direction”* (Gaensheimer et al, p. 39).

The transformative nature of *IMAG_NE* is clearly evident in the way it has brought radical change into my own life, and in its potential to do so in the lives of others. It is a deceptively simple, yet potentially revolutionary artwork. It no longer feels like my creation, but my responsibility to share its power with the world. Its continued resonance with individuals and communities continually amazes me, and makes me believe that if enough people can be turned on to the revolutionary potential inherent in the act of imagining and of creating alternatives, thoughts and visions, then the power of this work is a potent tool for the change I would like to bring about. As activist Angela Davis states *“I’ve always recognised my own role as an activist as helping to create conditions of possibility for change”* (Gaensheimer et al, p. 83). I came to understand that it would become my job to keep *IMAG_NE* present, and with an active - almost performative - public life.

In 2010 I was commissioned to create a new version of *IMAG_NE* for the City of Greater Dandenong (COGD) in suburban Melbourne. An appreciation of the importance of public art in that community was being buoyed and supported by the tireless work of Jenny Pemberton-Webb and Grissel Walmaggia who seeded my mind with the idea of continuing *IMAG_NE*’s pop-up adventures, with a version to be made for the City that would be relocated to four different sites over the course of two years. The work (Figures 12, 13 and 14) was integrated into various community building initiatives over its time in the community. It proved so popular that it was re-commissioned four times, resulting in an eventual decade-long relationship with local residents and visitors, demonstrating the importance of public art advocates in local authorities.

¹ Joseph Beuys cited at <https://www.intuitions.httpdot.net>.



Figures 12, 13 and 14. Emma Anna *IMAG_NE* for the City of Greater Dandenong, 2010 - 2020. Courtesy of the City of Greater Dandenong.

“Woundedness” or a sense of “missing-ness” within *IMAG_NE* is not something that is generally spoken of or observed, despite the obviously absent “I” piece. I attended the Melbourne Social Sculpture Forum’s *Show Your Wound* symposium at RMIT University’s School of Art directed by Ian George, Dr Wolfgang Zumdick and Beuys protege and Director of the Social Sculpture Research Unit at Oxford Brookes University, Professor Shelley Sacks. Participation in this forum further emphasised my connection points to the work of Beuys, and I empowered me in my efforts to evolve my experiment in social sculpture using *IMAG_NE* as the key. At the symposium I met the Colombian artist and academic Fernando García Vásquez, who’s ongoing miniature painting series *Nudes* also interrogates notions of absence (Figure 15).



Figure 15. Fernando García Vásquez, *Nude (after Bosch)*, oil on panel, 16cm x 32cm, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

Through my relationship with Fernando, I began my own relationship with his native homeland of Colombia. Over the past decade we have created and managed the cultural centre La Casa Verde, a site for experimental art, thinking, activities and

creativity in Barranquilla, Colombia, that we perceive as its own form of active social sculpture. The hexagon within the La Casa Verde visual identity is an allusion to Beuys, and his love of bees (Figures 16 and 17). Monies received from the touring of *IMAG_NE* help fund this initiative.



Figures 16 and 17. Emma Anna, Visual Identity for La Casa Verde Barranquilla, 2015.

As I evolved a life in two cultures, my thinking continued to connect to Beuys's ideas of the multiple through the public space pop up concept. In Australia, *IMAG_NE* toured up and down the East Coast of Australia from 2012 - 2016, with a highlight being its appearance at the National Library of Australia in 2015, and as part of the Dax Collection exhibition *Reverie*, in 2012. In New Zealand, *IMAG_NE* was commissioned for the City of Christchurch's reconstruction program following the devastating earthquake of 2011 and used as a tool to inspire and uplift locals during the reconstruction phase. Many initiatives were developed around the work for this particular realisation of *IMAG_NE*, with direct feedback sought from local residents recovering from the impact of the devastating earthquake (Figure 18).

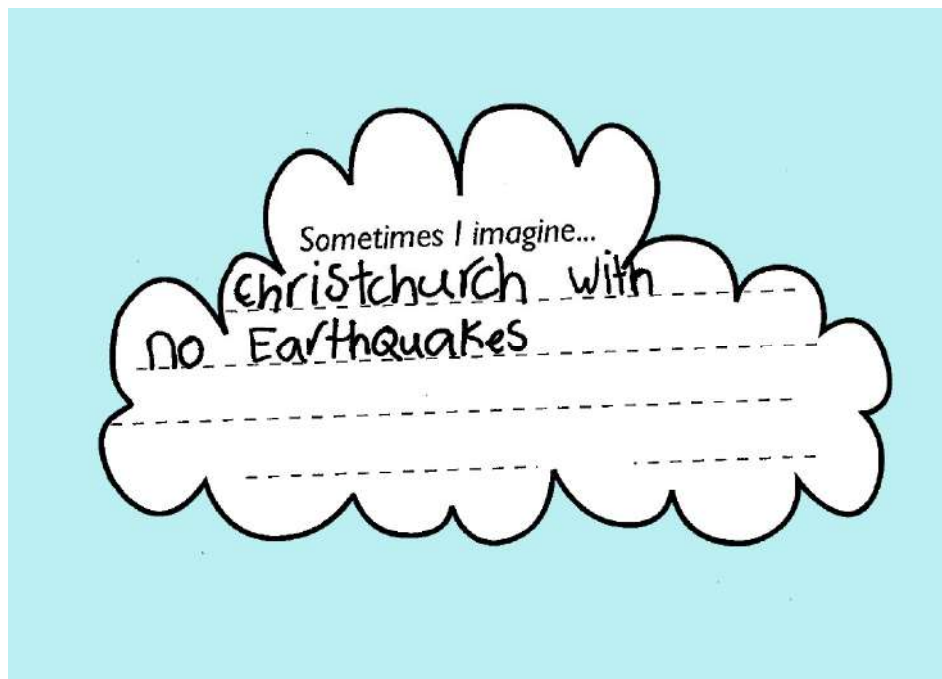


Figure 18. *Sometimes I imagine...* public contribution to anonymous wall installation at Christchurch City Library in support of *IMAG_NE Christchurch*, 2012. Image courtesy of Christchurch City Council, New Zealand.

The touring model developed to support *IMAG_NE*'s ongoing adventures addressed local government concerns over commissioning of permanent artwork and the constraints of local government budgets. *IMAG_NE* was modular, easy to install and the costs associated were minimal - these were required as a means of financing repairs, freight and installation costs in order to keep the project moving from one place to the next. In the many communities where it emerged, *IMAG_NE* was often anchored to the promotion of community initiatives, program launches or as framing reference for picture-perfect landscape backgrounds. For me the nature of the work continued to evolve as it popped up in multiple locations, just like the imagination itself, with ideas jumping from one place to another. From approximately mid-2012 onwards I began receiving interest in commissioning the work from communities in the United States with the work touring to Florida from 2014 - 2016, and permanent acquisitions commissioned by the City of Santa Clarita, California (2019) and the City of Port St Lucie, Florida (2021).



Figure 19. *GALAX_A* in situ at Plaza de la Paz (Peace Plaza), Barranquilla, Colombia, 2017 / Photography Emma Anna.

During this time I began working with other 7-letter words leading to an expansion of the initial project that I now call WORDPLAY.² These word / works have included *IMAG_NE* ('GALAXY' in English), developed in conjunction with Fundación Circulo Abierto (Open Circle Foundation) in Barranquilla, Colombia (Figure 19) as a means of promoting children's literacy and most recently, *MAGIC_L*, which will continue to resonate as a symbol of hope for the recently flood-ravaged community of Mullumbimby in Northern New South Wales, Australia.

The backstory to these multiple installations of *IMAG_NE* contain a million other anecdotes, tales of the people who assisted the transit or installation of the artwork, mishaps and saving graces, and connections with community members and photographic records of the work that have all embedded themselves into the narrative and history of the artwork. One of the most recent testaments to the power of *IMAG_NE* is a recent chapter that has emerged from the community of the Central Coast in New South Wales, Australia in which the potential of the work is bought to the fore again and furthers my interest in this work as a tool for community activism.

As the initial touring of *IMAG_NE* in Australia wound down in 2016, the work was acquired by the Central Coast Council with an understanding of a lifespan in public space of two years. This public work had continued to live on in the community beyond my prediction of two years. In late 2021, I was contacted requesting my authorisation to decommission the artwork, and also seeking costings for a new, permanent version. In February 2022 *IMAG_NE* was removed from its location (Figure 20) and replaced somewhat ironically with a Council authorised sign that explained its absence (Figure 21). I was instantly made aware of its new status via messages that I began receiving from local community members who were outraged that Council had removed the work. A petition was started at www.change.org.au³ by local residents addressed to Mr Rik Hart the Administrator of Central Coast Council demanding, "Mr Hart, start listening to the residents and rate payers, overturn the Council's decision and bring back OUR *IMAG_NE* sculpture now!"⁴ The petition eventually garnered over six hundred signatures. During its tenure in the local community *IMAG_NE* had become a very well loved and cherished object, with demands to "bring it back!"⁵ and "reinstate what is a local landmark and 'institution'."⁶ This reflected the community's sense of ownership of the public domain and being cut out of major decision making such as the de-commissioning of a local sculpture.

At the time that this drama was unfolding, a friend of mine alerted me to a possible Japanese translation of *IMAG_NE*: "ima in Japanese means now, and g-ne... vanished!"⁷ This opened new possibilities for responding to this situation that often occurs in the public domain where there can be a lack of priority given to art projects as an ingredient in community wellbeing. A new public work incorporating the concept of "vanished" has been proposed. The experience bought to light for me the grey area that surrounds this work public works. I had provided the work to Council at minimal cost but no parameters had been set around the work's future decommissioning.

² Instagram @emmaannawordplay.

³ Online community petition at www.change.org.au / <https://bit.ly/3usNnTM>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Adam Broinowski at <https://www.facebook.com/iamemmajanehancock/> 18 February, 2022



Figure 20. *IMAG_NE* in situ at Tascott foreshore, NSW Central Coast region, 2020.
 Courtesy: Therese Eley Photography.

The impact of *IMAG_NE* and the potential community reaction following its removal had been underestimated. Now, with the artwork gone, my only hope is that it can be reinstated in a timely manner in order to address community concern over its absence. *IMAG_NE* has been a vehicle for my ongoing research at the intersection of public art, social sculpture and a curiosity about the revolutionary potential of the human imagination. Its proven impact upon individuals and communities makes it a powerful statement work. Its multiple readings continue to expand in parallel with the political and social zeitgeist, which is perhaps why it has proven so enduring. It is a tool for change and healing, and could once again prove its worth as we collectively re-emerge from the challenges of the global Covid-19 pandemic. My task at hand now is to fill in the blanks on the story behind the work, which may well take the form of a narrative book, of which I have given you but a sketch.

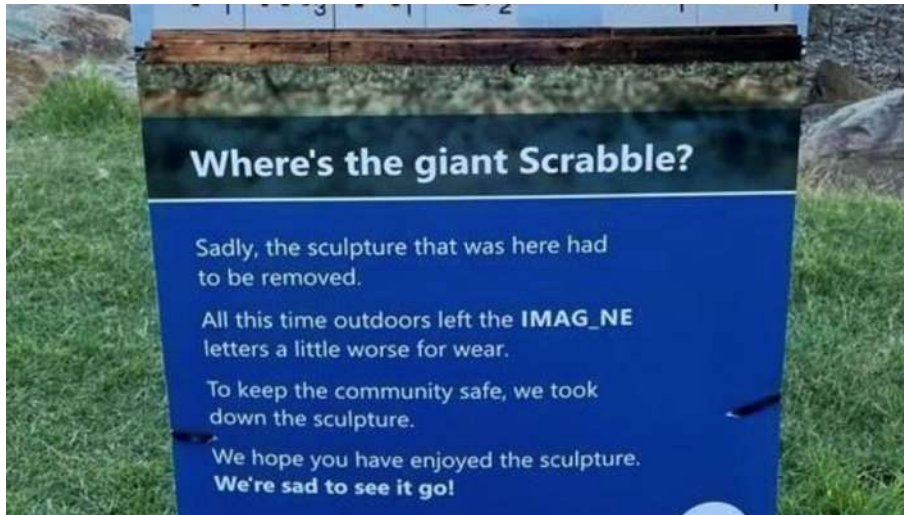


Figure 21. Council signage replacing *IMAG_NE*, Tascott foreshore, February 2022. Imagery sourced from www.change.org.au

REFERENCES

- Poch, A. and Poch, D. (2013) *Creaticity: Creative expressions in contemporary cities*. Lemo Editions / Kognitif, Barcelona, Spain.
- Debord, G. (1983) *La Société du Spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle)* translated by Fredy Perlman and Jon Supak, Published by Black & Red.
- Fung, V. (2013) *Exploring the artistic expression of reverie*. Exhibition catalogue essay, The Dax Centre, Melbourne, 2013.
- Gaensheimer, S., Malz, I., Nichols, C., Blume, E. (eds) (2021) *Everyone Is an Artist : Cosmopolitical Exercises with Joseph Beuys*. Published by Hatje Cantz Verlag GmbH, Germany.
- Last, E. (2013) *Solitude, creativity and wonder: finding reverie*. Exhibition catalogue essay, The Dax Centre, Melbourne.
- Sculpture by the Sea (2008) Bondi. Exhibition catalogue. Published by Sculpture by the Sea Inc., Sydney.
- Sculpture by the Sea (2011) The First Fifteen Years. Exhibition catalogue. Published by Sculpture by the Sea Inc., Sydney.

Fieldwork, A Trilogy

Ben Morieson

RMIT University, Australia

ben@carbencopy.com.au

Abstract

The *Fieldwork Trilogy* ran over 6 years and was intended to create a public discourse on the merits of creating public space or democratizing common areas within a high-density urban environment. The series of public interventions provoked discussion within a general public as to the purpose of public space and how to create it by ‘colonising’ pieces of the urban terrain. By using gardens (guerilla gardens) and claiming a space by the public, a place can be created within a built-up urban environment to be used by the community for leisure and other social activities. *Fieldwork I* was the beginning of a trilogy that used the public interaction to establish this ‘place’ or series of ‘places’. This was extended by incorporating the train line that ran along the Western edge of the site and became the genesis of *Fieldwork II – The Colonies*. The demand for public engagement with this version was greater and more radical and drew more passionate responses. A more ephemeral work, *Fieldwork III – Las Colonias* set up the dialogue but also highlighted a more nuanced and pre-existing culture of public space.

Keywords: public space, activism, fieldwork, guerilla gardens, urban terrain

To cite this article:

Morieson, B. (2022) “Fieldwork, A Trilogy”, *The Journal of Public Space*, 7(3). pp. 157-166. doi: 10.32891/jps.v7i3.1594.

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Fieldwork, A Trilogy

When invited to participate in the Havana Biennale 2019 I was excited by the prospect of setting up a project that would incorporate a public art project linking Melbourne, Australia with Havana, Cuba. But how could I possibly tie the two disparate cities and cultures together in an art project? This question was guided by the curatorial premise of the biennale curators that linked a suburban railway line in Melbourne known as the Upfield line and with the only electrified line in Cuba known as the Hershey Line. It was named after a famous chocolate manufacturer from the USA whose company had set up a sugar plantation outside Havana and built a village for workers to service the plantation in 1917. The town called Hershey was connected to Havana via the Hershey line. Upon arriving in Havana to identify potential sites, we discovered the Hershey Line was no longer operating. The whole premise for the exhibition was drifting sideways and the connection device had become tenuous.



Figure 1. Fieldwork - 2013/14, Melbourne. Image by Ben Morieson.

My take on this was to still find some common ground between Melbourne and Havana without relying on a railway line to forge a symbiosis. I took the project's core idea back to basics. By using public space and a public demand for greater access to public space it became apparent my earlier sunflower projects could be that vehicle to activate dialogue on 'private verses public.' This concept formed the basis of my first sunflower project titled "Fieldwork I" for my RMIT Master of Arts (Art in Public Space) research. "Fieldwork I" was a field of sunflowers in an empty private field. The space was in limbo whilst planning permits were being issued for a multi-story apartment development.



Figure 2. Alfred St, North Melbourne 2013. Image: Ben Morieson.



Figure 3. Wheatfield with Agnes Denes standing in the field. Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan. Image by Agnes Denes, 1982.

Fieldwork, A Trilogy

The site was about three acres in size and surrounded by a public housing estate on one end and industrial warehouses around the sides. It was overlooked by an elevated freeway with a railway line underneath it. The site had been left derelict but had its own thriving weed ecology and a few homeless campers in the bottom corner.

My idea was to use the site for an art project that would convert a private space into a public space simply by having people drawn into the field by their own volition. Agnes Denes touched on such ideas when in 1982 she created the seminal (landscape) work “Wheatfield - A Confrontation” on a two-acre landfill site in New York. This work fell into the category of Land Art but was also an intervention that drew on community activism and volunteers to create the work. This notion of community activist acquisition has been established in suburban streets on a macro level more recently with people planting out their nature strips, or sometimes creating informal community gardens in vacant lots. I wanted to create a beautiful space that would celebrate ‘acquisition by community stealth’. By activating these spaces for aesthetic and practical reasons, the community is acknowledging a lack of public space that meets their needs.

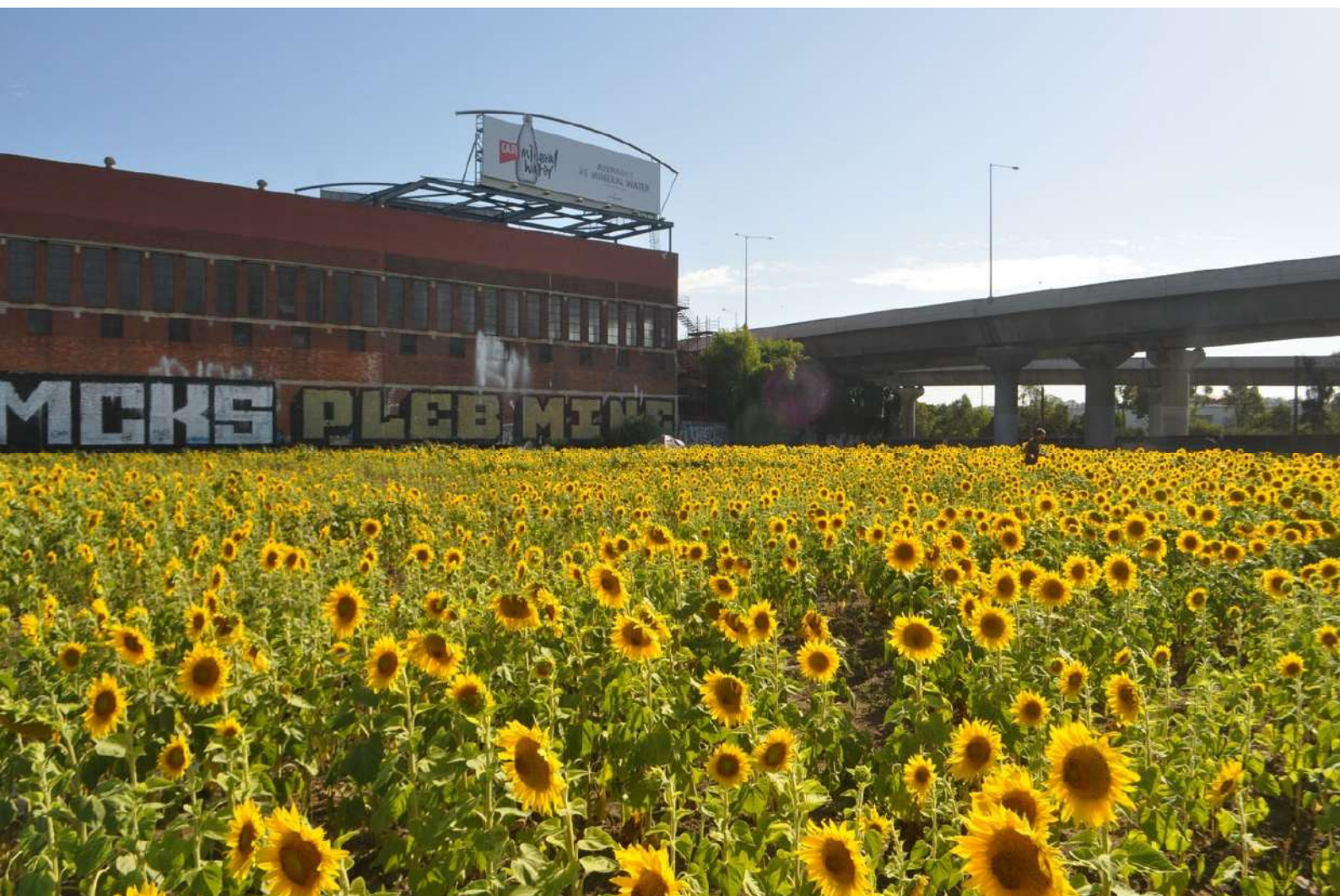


Figure 4. Fieldwork I. 2013/14, Melbourne. Image by Ben Morieson.

The work also drew on my earlier experience of visiting Cuba in 2012 and observing the setting up of kitchen gardens in urban wastelands (Organiponicos). Ever since Russia withdrew its economic support in the 1980s the Cubans became expert in self-reliance. While these gardens serviced a practical need I was also struck by their aesthetic in the colour and design embedded in the urban cityscape. This opened up the idea of using plants as an art practice in public space.

In 2017 the follow-on project from “Fieldwork I” was “Fieldwork II - The Colonies”. It was a project that invited people to create territories of public space through occupying and colonising space with sunflowers. Up and down the Upfield line from North Melbourne station to Upfield and back, a team of volunteers placed seventy-four shopping trolleys that had been planted out with sunflowers. The abandoned shopping trolley became a mobile garden and by parking them strategically in places of high traffic along bike paths and in adjacent parkland, the general public would find them as either an eyesore or a potential artwork of beauty. Either way the sunflower trolleys questioned ownership of public space. A sign on the side of the trolley explained the project and invited anyone to take care of the garden and even take the trolley to another place of their choosing. Playing with the ubiquitous e-bike pollution, one could undo the lock by texting me the number of the trolley to receive the code for the combination lock. They were then asked to forward a pin drop of the final location for the trolley once moved that assisted me with the retrieval at the end of the project, and to note that all the trolleys were recovered.



Figure 5. Fieldwork II – The Colonies, 2017. Melbourne. Image by Ben Morieson.

The adoption of the trolley gardens and the subsequent text messaging aimed to create a dialogue between myself and the public and in some cases morphed into shared observations about public space and also the occasional off beat rants about aliens imposing their will on the people! Social media also played a role and there were chats across Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter, about the 'mysterious' sunflower gardens and what their purpose may be.



Figure 6. Text feed: Adoptee moving one of the trolleys. 2019. Melbourne. Image: Ben Morieson (phone number was my project phone).

To try and tie this idea to Havana and any notions of conflict between public and private space as an intersect between the two suburban cultures was a challenge, as they take place in two very different political and socio-economic systems. Havana is a densely populated city with a Western architectural foundation that goes back several hundred years when only civic squares and small parks were acceptable as public space. In contrast Melbourne's inner city was developed at a time when setting tracts of land aside to create large parklands for the leisure of the people was considered crucial to

the well-being of society. The geography of the two cities couldn't be more different. One crucial difference I noticed on the first trip to Havana was the street life. In contrast to Melbourne's street life, in Havana life in public space is more relaxed and interactive. People bring their chairs onto the street and converse with passers-by or their neighbours to their left and right and to windows or balconies above. The street is not just a conduit for traffic but a public space for gathering and sharing laughter, banter and arguments in the most public way possible. It was this observation that inspired the making of my film as a companion piece to the sunflower trolley concept as the second part of the work to present at the Havana Biennale.

The sunflower trolleys along the Upfield line back in Melbourne was an ephemeral intervention as is much of my previous public artworks over thirty years of practice. Over that time, I began to document the process and outcome with photography and film and with each project, the film took on more significance. I have a parallel career in the film industry, and I integrated this interest into my artworks. In many cases the documentation would form the basis of alternative exhibitions, in gallery situations and quasi permanent artworks. I approached a filmmaker, Aaron Cuthbert, to work with me and together we made a series of films that included showing the process of distribution of the sunflower shopping trollies and then interviews with a selection of people who adopted a trolley and engaged with the work. On camera we discussed the role of public art and public spaces and their interaction with people, and this was interwoven with images of sunflowers and the process of making the artwork. My thinking was that by using films for both the Melbourne and Havana projects, I could set them against each other at the biennale to create a visual dialogue between the two situations.

"Fieldwork III- Las Colonias" created in Cuba, was made just prior to the opening of the Havana Biennale 2019. Earlier, on a reconnaissance in Havana the year before, I had made contact with several people who would help me realise this. Rachel Vallada was a former journalist with great research credentials and Victor Nunez a film maker who worked on science shows for a local TV network. But, my idea of making a film in the Cuban situation was fraught with bureaucratic hurdles.



Figure 7. Storyboard and location in Havana. Image by Ben Morieson.

My film concept was inspired by a film I had watched as a child. This French short film delivered with a 16 mm projector on a white vinyl extendable screen in a school hall was called 'The Red Balloon'. It was a beautiful story with no dialogue that I remember, of a boy who had lost his balloon and the camera tracked him as he pursued it through the streets of Paris in the 1950's. It was a vehicle to show Paris post WWII and the poetic photography celebrated the architecture and layout of the streets and the people that inhabited the public space of those streets.



Figure 8. Fieldwork III - Las Colonias, Havana. 2019. Film still, by Ben Morieson.

The 'balloon' became sunflowers drawing the attention of people in the street. The sunflower had fortuitously and coincidentally a quasi-religious significance in Cuban culture. My idea was to employ three bike transports which are commonly used to deliver small loads through the narrow streets of Old Havana. I organised the growing of a batch of sunflowers on a local Organiponico (a govt sanctioned collective market garden that services the local community and amenities such as hospitals and schools) that I had visited on a previous visit to Cuba.

The film followed these bike riders as they rode through the streets with a small garden of sunflowers on the back of their transporters. My concept was that by having people see the flowers they would be drawn into conversation about the event we were staging. We set up cameras in strategic positions and followed the riders who stopped occasionally during the journey. At every stop people came forward to talk about the flowers and their beauty, but also the importance of gardens and open space in a city. This dialogue was recorded and used in the film as a series of conversations about the streets and the utility of public space in a crowded neighbourhood.



Figure 9. Fieldwork III – Las Colonias, Havana. Members of the public in conversation with the riders about the sun flowers. Image: Ben Morieson.

We filmed two musicians from the Cuban Orchestra playing a classical Cuban piece called *La Bella Cubana* by Jose White. It was recorded in a church that was famous for its devotion to the sunflower as an icon associated with a female saint and I used it as the score for the film. The music guided some of the edit as we used the melody to create the timing for some of the shots. It was both melancholy and upbeat in places and suited the action of the cyclists as they rode at different paces depending on the terrain.

The two films from Melbourne and Havana were placed together on display in Casa de Asia, a museum dedicated to art from the Asia Pacific. The films were subtitled in English and Spanish respectively and timed precisely to loop simultaneously. The context was similar but the terrain in each situation was completely different. However, the sunflowers in the films managed to tie them together and help identify a universal conversation about the utility of public space and navigating the private/public discourse that prevails in that conversation.



Figure 10. Fieldwork III – Las Colonias, 2019, Havana. Image: Ben Morieson.

Reference

Fieldwork project: <https://www.facebook.com/fieldworkmelbourne>

Ben Morieson Art: <http://www.benmorieson.com.au/artwork.html>

Fieldwork III – Las Colonias: film link <https://vimeo.com/696850906>

Thank you for reading!

The Journal of Public Space

ISSN 2206-9658

Open access journal

Founder and Editor in Chief

Dr Luisa Bravo

City Space Architecture

ITALY

<https://www.journalpublicspace.org>

Founder



***City Space
Architecture***

Partner

UN HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE