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Reflecting on Four Performances in the Public Space of Athens

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Abstract

In this article I expound my work in public space through four performance pieces that I have presented over the last decade in several areas of Athens. I discuss these performances, focusing on the artist's experience and perspective regarding the underlying intentions, the methods employed, and the parameters that determine each piece. More specifically, the following works are studied:

Errants (Metaxourgeio, 2012): I invented a persona that would not trigger any sense of danger in those she encountered: a white, cisgender, well-dressed middle-class woman. She wandered the neighbourhood streets, dragging a wheeled suitcase behind her, looking for accommodation. The piece plays with the boundaries of the welcome or unwelcome stranger and attempts to intervene in the public sphere and to question issues such as racism and xenophobia.

Unneeded (Eleonas, 2018): In order to provide myself and others with an opportunity to release what they considered unnecessary and burdensome; I crafted a dress out of a plastic garbage bag. I wore this dress and along with the audience traced a long silent route in the Eleonas area after the Scavengers' Flea Market had been held. I asked people to leave whatever they deemed unnecessary on the dress. Arriving at Beton 7 gallery, I removed the dress and left it there, detached from all of us, as an exhibit.

Reconstruction (Lycabettus, 2020): This piece deals with the role of memory in constructing one's identity and the potential of actively intervening and altering it through the imprinting of photographs that depict moments of my personal life on my body. Ultimately, my body stood as an exhibit, a living and active archive, and the viewers bore witness to the intimate and transformative process that had taken place.

Pou edy mou to kallos (Lycabettus, 2022): It was a visual, abstract representation of Lili Zografou's novel of the same title. The text, the natural landscape, the performer's body, and

the dress were the axes that narrated the book's story and defined the performance. The sensory stimuli of the natural environment contributed to the overall experience of the performance.

Analysing these works, I realise that three main elements permeate them: the active participation of the audience, the element of ritual and the healing function of performance. To conclude, I reflect on the impact on performer's body, the fundamental role of space and time in public space performance, and the 'here and now' dimension of performance.

Keywords: Performance, public space, public time, audience participation, ritual, healing.

Reflecting on Four Performances in the Public Space of Athens

In this article, I am going to expound my work on public space by examining four performance pieces that I have presented over the last decade. I am going to discuss these performances, focusing on the artist's experience and perspective (Robson, 2007¹) regarding the underlying intentions, the methods employed and the parameters that determine each piece (Patton, 2002²).

Firstly, I will briefly introduce myself and provide some details that might be useful in analysing my work and linking it to my references and influences: I live in Athens. I am almost 40 years old. I have studied Psychology, Acting and Social Theory. I have long been interested in Physical Theatre and the intercultural dimensions of performance and I have attended relevant seminars. My mother was a seamstress, and I started sewing when I was 10 years old. I like walking in the city and go everywhere almost exclusively on foot. My mind works through images. My memories, feelings and inspiration are primarily visual.

Initially, I explored performativity in politics, within the repertoires of action of social movements in particular. During my postgraduate studies, I focused on performance as a form of collective action in Greece during the early post-dictatorship period (1974-1981). Drawing material and inspiration from performative actions of social movements in the 1960s in Europe and America, I sought to identify in Greek social movements similar practices of embodied ways to engage with politics and the public sphere beyond traditional methods such as marches, political texts and proclamations. In my artistic practice, I attempted an individual embodied intervention in the public sphere through the practice of performance.

¹ Corresponding to diaries and in-depth interviews as qualitative research practices, I support that the artist's experience and perspective can be conveyed by the artist herself.

² Patton organises the sampling possibilities in qualitative research into fifteen categories. Among them there is 'Criterion sampling', whereby the researchers can select their case studies with reference to a criterion.

The Performances

Errants

In 2012, Athens was grappling with the issue of migration and its residents were confronted with questions of how to manage the situation and interact with newcomers seeking shelter and work. It was at this time that I conducted a performance piece titled *Errants* in Metaxourgeio, an area in Athens where a significant portion of the migrant population had settled.

With the aim of exploring the sense of the welcome or unwelcome stranger, I invented a persona that would not trigger any sense of danger in those she encountered: a white, cisgender, well-dressed, middle-class woman. She wandered the streets of the neighbourhood, dragging a wheeled suitcase behind her, looking for accommodation (Figure 1). She approached passers-by, shop owners, and people on the balconies of their apartments, asking if they knew where she could stay that night. Eventually, she laid down on the steps of a building, along with her essential sleep accessories: a sleep mask and her moisturiser.

Figure 1

Errants. The Invented Persona. Photographer: Dimitris Bampilis.



A significant aspect of this piece was its integration into the residents' daily lives, seamlessly blending in, without the overt theatrical elements that would make it stand out as a separate event. Moreover, the intention was to communicate with the residents, involve them in the performance, and introduce them to a symbolic figure, a living embodiment of a different

kind of stranger that contrasts with the perception of strangers as threats. By challenging preconceptions and prejudices about immigrants, the performance aimed to initiate meaningful conversations and challenge the boundaries of acceptability.

Unneeded

The second piece, titled *Unneeded*, was presented in 2018. It was part of an exhibition at the gallery Beton 7, which was called *Vision V-Ideas Performances* and was curated by Dimosthenis Agrafiotis and Rania Kliari.

In this work, my focus shifted from political issues to matters of personal identity. I attempted to bring a psychological process to the realm of experience through an embodied performance. I also aimed to experiment with the healing function of performance. More particularly, having found myself at a personal impasse, I felt the need to let go of what I considered unnecessary and burdensome. I wanted to discard the weight that had held me down. To fulfil this purpose, I created a ritual with therapeutic intent, which can be broken down into three stages.

Figure 2

Unneeded. Route in the Elaionas Area. Photographer: Alexandros Gartzonikas.



The initial concept was to create a space where individuals could dispose of things, thoughts, or ideas they no longer wished to carry. I aimed to provide myself and others with an opportunity to release the excess baggage. To symbolise this process, I crafted a dress out of

a plastic garbage bag. The viewers here became witnesses and fellow travellers in this experience, actively participating in the entire process. The element of participation continued to play a central role in this project too.

In the first phase of the performance—the initiation—we traced a long, silent route in the Eleonas area on a Sunday afternoon, right after the Scavengers' Flea Market had been held (Figure 2). The purpose was to share the experience of the place where the city's “double” waste is collected, what is thrown away by its inhabitants and what is left behind by the street vendors.

During the second phase —the act—I removed the paper tape I wore as a bracelet and the markers I wore in my hair. I wrote on pieces of the paper tape the things I wanted to discard and then stuck them on the dress. I invited each spectator, as well as the patrons of nearby coffee shops and passers-by to do the same and leave whatever they deemed unnecessary on my dress. Some chose to leave an object like a band-aid, while others wrote words such as “clocks”, “truth”, or “children” (the latter was written by an artist who expressed his desire to quit teaching and focus on his art).

Once this process was complete, we arrived at the gallery where the third phase of the ritual—the purification—unfolded. I took off the dress and placed it on a hanger in the centre of the room (Figure 3). Suspended there, detached from all of us, the dress stood as an exhibit, serving as a tangible record of an intangible process.



Figure 3

Unneeded. *The Dress as an Exhibit*
Photographer: Alexandros Gartzonikas

Reconstruction

The subsequent work, titled *Reconstruction*, was part of the 2nd Lycabettus Festival in 2021. It carries on with the exploration of personal identity and the healing function of performance. It delves further into the element of ritual, while introducing the concept of the performance of self (Goffman, 1959). This performance deals with the role of memory in constructing one's identity and the potential of actively intervening and altering it.

In retrospect, this piece appeared to have emerged organically out of the preceding work, *Unneeded*. A self that has previously been purged of the unnecessary, now awaits reconstruction, using and rearranging the existing materials. The materials for the construction of this new self-narrative are life experiences in the form of memories. Elements which one can intentionally play with, deleting or highlighting aspects of them, finally resulting in a conscious creation of a renewed version of the self.

My aim was to reconstruct my personal history, as a conscious analogue to the mechanism of memory; to reconstruct my past by creating a new narrative of my own through a fragmented montage inscribed on my skin. The process of becoming this new self was performed live before the viewers. They stand as witnesses who validate this self-healing ritual, they are part of the healing process, and they are also invited to reconsider their own self-narrative and recreate their self-dramaturgy.

Photographs were employed as tangible records of memories in this process. They depicted moments from my life, including people, landscapes, and significant events that have shaped who I am. Standing almost naked, exposed and vulnerable, my body became a blank canvas ready for transformation. The photographs were laid on the ground around me like a personal archive, also exposed to the viewers.

From each photo, I carefully selected what I wanted to remember and determined how I wished to preserve those memories. I proceeded to outline my chosen memories as desired and to imprint them onto my body. The specific body part where each coloured image was imprinted was directly connected to the purpose behind reshaping the memory (Figure 4). For instance, a cherished childhood photograph, a family favourite, was placed over my heart. Moments from my involvement in social movements were outlined in purple and placed on my feet, as the foundations of my worldview. The imprints, resembling childhood tattoos, spread over the body and mark this journey, leaving me overwhelmed in front of the audience. Although the whole process was part of the plan, I was still surprised by the emotions it evoked and how hard it was for me to redefine each memory. Ultimately, my body stood as an exhibit, a living and active archive, and the viewers bore witness to the intimate, transformative process that had taken place. The private body, now exposed, became public, and personal memory

merged with collective memory. Upon leaving, one spectator recognised another and remarked, “Oh, I know you. I’ve seen you in a photo.”

Figure 4

Reconstruction. *Imprinting Photos on the Body*. Photographer: Alexandros Gartzonikas.



Figure 5

Reconstruction. *The Body Merges with the Background*. Photographer: Alexandros Gartzonikas.



The performance took place on Lycabettus Hill on a Sunday evening at the end of May 2022. It was presented at the cliff's edge during sunset, in order to serve the sense of liminality and the transition from an inadvertently shaped self to one consciously reinvented through the performance. Furthermore, the glow of the setting sun on the cliff paints it in colour tones that resemble the human skin, creating an image where the body merges with the background (Figure 5).

Pou Edy mou to Kallos

My latest work is titled *Pou edy mou to kallos* and was created for the 3rd Lycabettus Festival in 2022. It is a visual, abstract representation of Lili Zografou's novel of the same title. This particular work introduced a shift in the tools and methods I use. Two essential elements were incorporated: the spoken word and the presence of a preconstructed narrative. Consequently, we transitioned from the "I am here and now" aspect of the performance, according to Marina Abramović³, to the act of narrating another person's story. While the visual element remained prominent, it no longer seemed appropriate to categorise the piece as performance art, but rather as visual theatre or site-specific theatre, given its representation of a story.

The novel's title is a modified version of a line from the Greek-Orthodox Mass hymn sung on Good Friday. The original line, "Where did thy beauty go?" was transformed by Lili Zografou to "Where did my beauty go?" The novel revolves around the narration of a young Greek girl (Maria) and the love between her and a German soldier (Franz) during the German occupation of Greece. Their relationship is abruptly interrupted when the German troops depart from Greece. Maria is compelled to marry a man she does not love and grows old and unhappy alongside him. When Frantz returns from exile in Siberia thirty years later and seeks her out, she lacks the courage to meet him. Instead, she locks herself in her house and remains isolated for the rest of her life. Throughout the text we follow the journey of Maria, a young and beautiful woman, as she gradually ages and becomes isolated.

The text, the natural landscape, the performer's body, and the dress were the axes that defined the performance. A recorded reading of the text was incorporated into the installation,

³ In March of 2016, Marina Abramović gave a series of lectures and ran several workshops in Athens, as part of the exhibition *As One*, at Benaki Museum. In her opening lecture (11.03.2016), she argued that the main characteristics of performance art are that it is executed at a specific time and space and that it anticipates the presence of the public. She also argued that the element that characterises and defines the performance is the presence of the artist 'here and now', at that particular moment. In her lecture on the history of performance (19.03.2016) she explains that that specific moment and time are the artist's only reality and (...) what matters is the process, not the result. In 22.03.2016 in a Performance workshop, Abramović explained that the difference between theatre and performance is that in performance everything is real: "you are not a character, you are you, a knife is a knife and blood is blood, it is not ketchup."

keeping the book's heroine at a certain distance from the viewers and the performer. The recording included the sounds of a double bass, the sole reminder of an absent male.

The performance took place on the hill of Lycabettus, on the iron staircase leading to the war siren. An imposing iron staircase consisting of 99 steps, adding an eerie beauty to the surrounding natural landscape, is directly associated with the war and the German occupation. During the painstakingly slow ascent of the staircase, lasting 22 minutes (corresponding to the duration of the text reading), the performer's body symbolically reenacted the heroine's journey. Initially, the performance unfolded with a young, light, open and fluidly moving body, full of vibrance and the juices of life. However, the body gradually hardened and withered, as her beloved departed and Maria was forced to live a life, she did not desire (Figure 6). It finally stiffened and contracted, as she grew old, all alone. At the beginning, the body was partially uncovered, but as the performance progressed, wounds were covered with gauze, until it was entirely concealed beneath a sheet, like a shroud.



Figure 6

Pou Edy mou to Kallos. *The Body Gradually Withered*.
Photographer: Nikos Katsaros.

The costume designer Daphne Aidoni and I designed and crafted a white dress with an extra-long tail. It unfolded behind me, capturing different periods of the heroine's life. The fabric of the tail of the dress started out as organza, resembling mother-of-pearl, as Frantz once described Maria's skin. Then, when Frantz departed the fabric changed to gauze, then it became waterproof as Maria described the distance she maintained from her husband, it turned to satin when Frantz reappeared, and ultimately transformed into a shroud-like sheet when she decided not to meet him and to remain confined within her house. The body slowly climbing up the staircase carrying the weight of a 40-metre-long dress and the trauma of patriarchy, brings Jesus to mind - a reference alluded to the title - carrying on his back the cross of suffering and the weight of the sins of the world (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Pou Edy mou to Kallos. *The Body Climbing up the Staircase Carrying a 40-Metre-Long Dress.* Photographer: Nikos Katsaros.



The sound of the dress unfolding on the staircase, the wind lifting the fabric and creating folds, the birds flying low above me, were all sensory stimuli that contributed to the overall experience of the performance.

In this work the performer “hides” herself behind the role of Maria, while at the same time the sense of withdrawal is intensified by the voice that is recorded and the body that gradually and spatially fades into the distance. At the same time, the participation of the spectators who

are invited to delve into the trauma is reduced to their freedom to move in space and choose their position towards the spectacle.

The performance took place during two distinct periods: one in May, following Easter Time (the original text is rich in references to the psalms of Holy Week), when nature is in full bloom, and the other in September, when nature starts to wane. In the latter, nature proved a more suitable interlocutor as it intensified the sense of decay that also permeates the text. The sunset was chosen as the most appropriate time to witness the sunset of Maria's life and beauty.

Interestingly, the choice of space in this instance worked in a way that was completely different from the previous pieces. During the first COVID-19 lockdown, while walking at Lycabettus Hill, I stumbled upon this imposing staircase. Associatively, Zografou's novel came to mind and almost automatically the image of this solitary ascent and the white dress covering the staircase emerged. Thus, the intense landscape brought the text to my mind and gave birth to the performance's visual image. In a way, the natural scenography imposed the staging.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to focus on three elements that, to varying degrees, permeate much or all my work.

Firstly, the active participation of the audience (Schechner, 2005) plays a crucial role in the execution and accomplishment of each project's goals. From *Errants* and its dynamic engagement with the local community to *Unneeded* where the audience actively participates in the walk among the excess baggage in Elaionas and interacts with the performer and the dress contributing to its final version; to *Reconstruction* where the audience "binds" the performance through its presence. Even in *Pou Edy mou to Kallos* where spectators⁴ need to go up the hill, following the white ribbons of the dress fabric in order to witness the performance (Goldman, 2017), and to choose where they will stand, whether they will be still or moving.

Secondly, the element of ritual (Schechner, 2013) in my work takes various forms. It ranges from the personal rituals of *Errants* -such as the invented persona's daily routines, even when sleeping on the street- to the shared rituals between the audience and the performer in *Unneeded* -such as strolling around the bazaar remnants, leaving on the dress whatever they find unnecessary or burdensome; to the slow, repetitive, and transformative rituals of memory and self-reconstitution in *Reconstruction*. Finally, there's the slow, mystical ascent of the

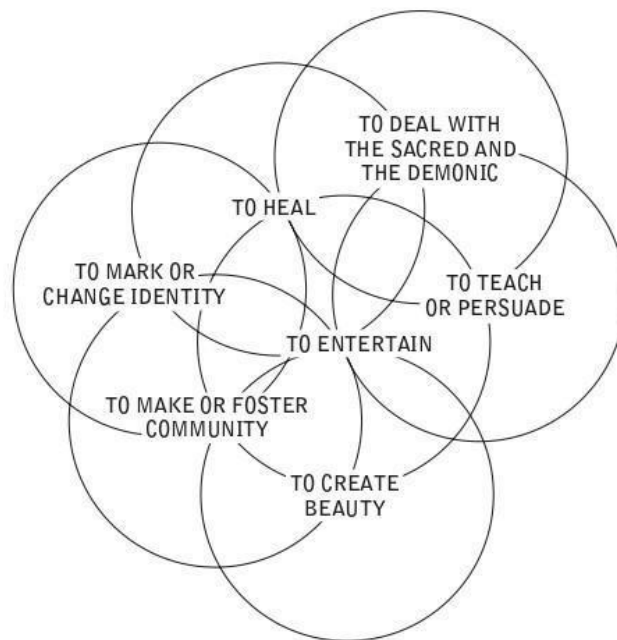
⁴ Given J. Rancière's (2011) concept about *the emancipated spectator*, spectators participate in every performance. According to Rancière, the spectators also act. They observe, select, compare, interpret. They connect what they see with many other things they have seen or experienced. They make up their own poem with the elements of the poem in front of them. They participate in the performance by reconstructing it in their own way. They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle presented to them.

performer up the hidden staircase into the evocative landscape, that contributes to the ritualistic experience of *Pou Edy mou to Kallos*.

Thirdly, a healing function (Schechner, 2013)⁵ (Figure 8) seems to be the main reason for the creation of each work. In *Errants*, a collective therapy seeks to heal the community from prejudices that hinder coexistence with strangers. *Unneeded* fosters an individual healing process within a collective environment which integrates every person's experience. *Reconstruction* is, in itself, a personal healing ritual that leads to self-transformation and healing. Lastly, in *Pou Edy mou to Kallos* we return to the collective trauma of patriarchy, embodied in the form and movement of the performer, who confronts this trauma through the visual representation of the story of the book's heroine.

Figure 8

The Seven Interlocking Spheres of Performance. Drawing by Richard Schechner (2013, p. 46).



As a final point, I would like to shed light on the perspective of the artist and the impact that performing a piece in a public space has on them, based on my own experience.

When a body is placed in a public space, it becomes more vulnerable and at the same time more receptive to interaction. This experience becomes susceptible to the unpredictability of human presence and the natural elements -as in real life- and ultimately influences the performer at a core level.

⁵ According to R. Schechner one of the seven functions of performance is "to heal".

The “here and now” of the performance is identified with public space and time. And the truth of the self is strengthened when it exists without the protection of the theatre or the role. In public space performance, space and time are of great significance instead of just being supplementary parameters. They become fundamental notions as essential as content and action (Goldberg, 2011)⁶. Not only do they contribute to the aesthetic dimension of a piece, but they are also dynamic foundations of the original design. They produce meaning and staging direction.

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⁶ Goldberg (2011, pp. 134-138) discusses the element of place. She quotes Oldenburg “the place in which the piece occurs (...) is part of the effect, and usually the first and most important factor determining the events (materials at hand being the second and players the third). The place could have any extent, a room or a nation’. Referring to Robert Whitman’s piece *Prune Flat*, she also says that time and space become the central features of the work.