

## PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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PERFORMANCE & SPACE II. PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2024 CONFERENCE



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### Performance, Social Space, and Hospitality: Sociological Investigation of Participatory Art

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## Performance, Social Space, and Hospitality: Sociological Investigation of Participatory Art

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### Abstract

The objective of this text is to present narratives of artists and non-artists who participated in the platform *Blind Date*. *Blind Date* is a research and artistic platform that cultivates collaborative actions, with the cooperation of two different groups of people (artists/non-artists, visual artists/ poets, artists/refugees etc.), in connection with space and community. We will capture aspects of the discourse of the platform participants, who were investigated through in-depth interviews.

The research questions deal with issues of participation in the project: what is the relationship between the *Blind Date* experience and social space in each project? In what way is the artistic action connected with performativity? How do the participants perceive concepts such as cooperation, participation, and collectiveness in their practice? What is the connection between participation, hospitality, and performance in the narratives of the participants? What are their expectations from participating in *Blind Date*? How is the experience of participating in the project reflected? Did their participation in *Blind Date* influence their subsequent professional career?

The interview material was examined through discourse analysis and discursive psychology methodology (Potter & Wetherell 1987; Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). The research and analysis were carried out within a sociological framework. It was important to examine sociological theories on art creators that enlighten and strengthen our analysis (Bourdieu 1993, 1995; Becker 1982, 1974; Heinich 2004; Elias 1982). Further, sociological approaches to collaboration (Becker 1974; Sennett 2012, Goffman 1972) enhanced our approach to the importance of participation, action, and performance in community and social space.

The results of the interviews depict interesting perspectives of the participants that interconnect their interaction in the platform with matters and terms of 'social space' and 'time', with 'artistic practices'. The practices and actions include performative, bodily, and participatory aspects of the interaction process of the project. The terms mentioned above link the participants with the notions of performativity, social space/community, and hospitality.

**Keywords:** Sociology of art, art creators, participatory art, social space, hospitality

## Social Space

Durkheim refers to how space is socially constructed (Schroer, 2021) and to social space as geographical areas that are divided and inhabited by social groups (1960, pp. 27-28, 186). From this perspective, society can be seen as a collective entity and consists of the body (substratum) and the mind (social life) (1960, pp. 79-80, 82, 338-9).

Henri Lefebvre (1991, p. 33) analyses social space in three particular modes: Spatial practice, Representations of space, and Representational space. In the current unit we will move between Spatial practice (space perceived in daily routines and activities) and Representational space (subjective experience of space, accompanied by emotions, symbols, images).

The participants express their expectations by linking what happens in the local community with needs, actions, and demands. The sociologist Dépy Christakou (2014), who participated in “Ephemeral Habitus” in Patras,<sup>1</sup> refers to the city's issue with the non-use of the waterfront and its connection to *Blind Date*. According to Lydia Matthews, “A large swath of Patras’ urban coastline was now inaccessible to the public, and yet it seemed that no one recognized its historical or intrinsic value of this area that had once been a public space.” (Matthews, 2017). This issue is addressed by Christakou in the interviews conducted as part of the *Blind Date* research project, “.discussing since the previous [day], about whether there is a sea front in Patras, which there is no sea front, because this city is separated by the railway lines and I think that was the purpose of the initiative, a bit of the promotion of an issue through the voice of the citizens, beyond whether the character we mentioned can also have the artistic, political dimension it represents community.”

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<sup>1</sup> As Lydia Matthews mentioned about Adonis Volanakis *Blind Date* coordinator:

“Commissioned by the Greek port city of Patras’ Municipality Theatre in 2014, he gathered students from the local acting school, architects, a group of immigrants/refugees, as well as other interested residents to participate in an intensive workshop. Working together for three hours daily over a period of 2 months, they researched and responded to the city’s coastal zone, which had transformed radically since becoming privatized. (...) Working in small multidisciplinary groups, these “blind date” teams gathered local residents’ stories about the area, conducted library research and chose specific sites of interest that merited closer public scrutiny. They then shared what they had learned with each other and co-created the choreography of a six-hour, 5-kilometer participatory public walk that mapped key sites along the waterfront through site-specific performances.

This music and dance-filled walk began with 25 people, but as curious residents joined in and became actors themselves, the promenade grew to include over 500 people. Residents were free to join all or parts of the walk, and at various locations the scenarios unfolded: they enacted an imaginary official ribbon cutting ceremony that mimicked what it would look like to re-open the coastal gates, generating spontaneous applause by the locals.” (Lydia Matthews, 2017)

In the interview excerpt above, social categories (citizens), beliefs (there is no seafront in the city, the purpose of the initiative), causal relationships (initiative - promotion of an issue), events (artistic action with a political/community dimension) appear. A heterogeneous group of people who share common values come together in a geographical location for a common face-to-face collaboration (Bublitz et al, 2019, p. 316).

## **Performance and Artistic Practices**

The participants mention performance, as well as artistic and social action in their narratives about their *Blind Date* experience. Gerasimos Giovanakis (2014) refers to “ephemeral habitus”, describing it as an invitation to citizens and an event of artistic pride in the city. He refers to the discussion and pre-work on the concept of performance by the coordinator Adonis Volanakis, which seems to have played a role here as well as in the execution of the action.

In the interview, participant Dépy Christakou refers to a march with students to the top, which turned into a carnival “in a very beautiful way, with music, percussion, and singing”. She felt like she was part of a team that had its rhythm. We can trace the passage from the games of active action, to the playful meeting of participation - gaming and the gaming encounter (Goffman, 1972, p. 33), as crystallized in the narrative of Dépy Christakou.

In relation to moments of social and political assertion, Lydia Matthews (2017) sets the tone: “These and other moments made strangers realize that it is possible to occupy and reclaim parts of a city by investigating its history and re-valuing what has been discarded or taken from them.”

## **Hospitality**

Hospitality is a unique and multifaceted concept that deserves to be redefined: “as an ordinary practice of accommodation, a mechanism, an ideology, an idea, and a normative principle” (Boudou, 2023). It is a term with a long history. According to Aristotle (1998, 1263a), a virtuous landlord should be practising hospitality, and also proprietorship should be welcoming.

As Lydia Matthews (2017) mentions, there are implicit aspects of politics in Blind Dates. In this project, trust and courage are cultivated in order to surpass xenophobia, “the fear of Other”, and incorporate philoxenia/hospitality. Using Derrida's dilemma “[b]etween an unconditional law or an absolute desire for hospitality on the one hand and, on the other, a law, a politics, a conditional ethics” (1996/ 2000, p. 147), Volanakis supports the passage from the second (law, conditional ethics) to the unconditional acceptance and fruitful interaction.

Poet Kathy Engel refers to the care that existed, knowing and deeply connecting with others, as well as the relationships sustained after the Blind Date. It was a process she loved and learned from.

In her interview, Pavlina Marvin, focusing on the processes of the project, refers to the non-directive method and the sense of freedom she experienced. At the same time, the collaboration developed in an intergenerational group, which was characterized by inclusion.

The refugees B. & G. in their interviews talk about a natural process that was very pleasant. B. was 12 years old and accepted what was happening as something natural. Something natural that is built within a friendly atmosphere involves both initiated and non-initiated individuals, strengthens the belief in art, and develops the method through experience.

## Epilogue

The research focuses on participants in the activities of the *Blind Date* platform, which adopts forms of participatory art.

It would be very interesting to include in the future, in the exploration of the creators of art and artworks, art-based research. In performance and space research it is important to use methods that investigate participants' discourse, representations, memories, and emotions.

The notions of social space, performance, and hospitality were important for the interaction and cooperation of participants in the project. We presented research material in brief, while there are more narratives mentioning these important terms of creation.

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