

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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Familiarizing the City

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Familiarizing the City**Katerina Kataki**

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Abstract

In post-covid Athens, the collective experience of forbidden common spaces initiated lots of questions on our rights as citizens and the way we participate in our cities. The need to reconnect and interact with fellow citizens and the city emerged as a necessity in my artwork. Starting off this simple, yet fundamental quest, I created two durational, participatory performances, both unfolding in public space in order to explore building altered modes of urban interaction that are connected to active citizenship practices. In the first work titled *Δημόσια Ημερολόγια//Public Diaries*, a live installation of a collective diary was gradually built on the pavement of the public square gathering various notes of the artist and the passers-by. Through the public action of private writing and visual choices, the behavioural limits of the personal and the public spheres tended to blur, inviting new transparent actions and spaces for personalized participation and interaction in the city. The second work, *Οδοιπόροι_City Steps*, was a walking participatory performance formed as a contemporary devised ritual through the actions of escorting, wandering, and gestural imprinting within the city. Through experiential structured processes, the performance highlighted a “New Contemporary City” that emerges by the embodied action of participation through our present steps and print choices -both symbolically and realistically- signifying the person-citizens and their identity as the unique and indispensable ingredient of this rejuvenated urban loci. Both of the performances aimed to function as socio-artistic experiences but also experiments that observe, document, and possibly recharge the urban fabric in terms of space and relations, inviting the possibilities of altered ways of living together and social building into our cities, aspiring to empower a sense of community and equal belonging as well as a call on public action of freedom and creativity.

Keywords: Performance Art, Public Space, Public Art, Socially Engaged Practise, Familiarity in Public Space

Familiarizing the City

Focusing on the verbal roots of the Greek word for city, “polis,” we notice it includes three concepts. Apart from the geographic notion, it refers to the people who inhabit this geographical area, but also the life that is built through their habits. All these basic city components changed profoundly during Covid-19; Limiting social and artistic life to disembodied interaction while incidents of violence trespassed human rights and challenged democratic values,¹ led to the phenomenon of empty public spaces turning the city into estranged urban scapes.

Trying to re-approach Athens after Covid, multiple questions about the presence and interaction of humans in public urban spaces arose; *Who is the city now? Can the city become a “public safe place”? Can we familiarize cities by community actions?* Those fundamental quests inspired two durational performances as a response.

Figure 1

Δημόσια Ημερολόγια // Public Diaries. Photography Credits: Alexander Koromilas



The performance titled *Public Diaries // Δημόσια Ημερολόγια* (Figure 1, 2) presented the artist at her private office in Syntagma Square, typewriting a personal-public diary gradually

¹ National Commission for Human Rights. Report on the effects of the pandemic and the wombs?? on dealing with human rights and threats to the State. May 2021.
https://nchr.gr/images/pdf/apofaseis/COVID/Ekthesi_Anaforas_Covid_19.pdf

built as a live installation of personal-notes on the square's pavement after three hours. Any passer-by could leave their own handwritten notes, thus participating in this communal process. The work aimed to challenge, re-compose and highlight the combined realities of personal and public spheres that are interconnected, as Lefebvre (1991) points it out, and furthermore follow his statement on "altered sources of knowledge" (p. 73) and "fresh actions" (p.166) that both lie in social space. Each note framed in every pavement's plaque invited the passers-by to change their walking pace and lower their body in order to access it. Altered body postures emerged for the passers-by, joining the vertical with the horizontal axis generating new embodied interactions with the self, the others and the environment. A different experience of the square emerged; a temporary sense of belonging and encouragement for sharing and daring to act, as participants confirmed. If the action of speech becomes a means of transformation for the one who talks, according to Valery's (1980, pp. 63-64) thought, perhaps the action of public writing could function similarly, facilitating the personal transition of expression both of the writer but also of the viewer as a mirroring process, suggesting personal space into a public collective diary space.

Figure 2

Δημόσια Ημερολόγια // Public Diaries. Photography Credits: Alexander Koromilas.



Figure 3

Οδοιπόροι _City Steps. Photography Credits: Alexander Koromilas & Xenia Tsilochristou.



Similar issues were explored by the work *Οδοιπόροι _City Steps* (Figure 3), a durational participatory walking performance. Aligned with Debord's (1997) statement on cultural construction as an experiment construction of reality,² the work created a devised *ritual of passage*, which signified the personal presence of participants within the city center. The artistic team³ "inhabited" a small square locating the "*Liminal Cube*" (Figure 4) a transit place, where the participants listened to a sonic invitation to walk and experiment with the urban streets along with a performer. Later on, the participants became performers of their city by creating their own "pendent-stamp" and marking urban spots as a gestural personal-public act during their escorted stroll (Figure 5). The project applied protective characteristics met in rituals⁴ and tried to facilitate a curated personal experience into public view and vice versa, steering both participants and passers-by towards creative embodied possibilities of their

² "Situationists consider cultural activity, from the standpoint of totality, as an experimental method for constructing daily life, which can be permanently developed with the extension of leisure and the disappearance of the division of labor" (Debord, 1997, pp. 90-92).

³ A facilitator, the visual artist and the performers disguised as spirits.

⁴ Van Gennep's (2016, p. 253) analytical work on Rituals of Passage point out the importance of rituals as processes of protection of the society and the persons of it.

“new city”. This new and democratic city is constantly rejuvenated by the uniqueness of persons-citizens, their participation and action of their steps, reminding Solnit’s comment on walking the city as a “vital beginning point to citizenship” (Solnit, 2001, p.176).

Both of the above durational performances took place in the city center of Athens. They aimed to function as artistic actions of altered participation that practice democratic values, while strengthening various spaces such as emotional, social, and embodied spaces. Summing the above, “Familiarizing the City” could be translated as an artistic participatory practice of re-acting the space through new curated rituals and common experiences that promote creative citizenship, feelings of inclusion and community belonging in public spaces. Perhaps a new contemporary city could arise applying what Melucci names as “society of persons” (2002, p. 138,152) and “a democracy of new spaces for negotiation” (p.267).

Figure 4

Οδοιπόροι_City Steps. Photography Credits: Alexander Koromilas & Xenia Tsilochristou.



Figure 5

Οδοιπόροι_City Steps. Photography Credits: Alexander Koromilas & Xenia Tsilochristou.



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