

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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Performing Space 2024 - Introduction

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Performing Space 2024

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Performing Space is a research project that explores the relationship between performance and the built environment, taking into account the different perspectives of disciplines that study human activity and space, such as anthropology, archaeology, architecture, economics, law, philosophy, sociology, or theatre studies. The project understands “performance” as “all activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (Goffman, 1956, pp. 8-9). Following this definition, any activity that people carry out with the conscious or (usually) unconscious intention of “influencing” their social and spatial environment could be considered a ‘performance’. Catherine Bell (1992) and other authors argue that our performances influence our environment by transforming it; at the same time, the environment influences our behaviours and mental states. The title of this project, *Performing Space*, refers to this circular process of environmental transformation through our performances and the influence of the environment on our performances, as well as to the space in which performances take place: the built environment.

In *Performing Space*, we emphasise that our bodies are the instruments through which we perceive our environment (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) and also the instrument through which we understand how space affects our behaviours or our mental states. As early as the 1980s, during the initial days of performance studies, Victor Turner (1982) realised, through his collaboration with Richard Schechner, that in order to study “human reality”, anthropologists had to become performers. In other words, to understand different human cultures, anthropologists must immerse themselves in a society, carrying out its rituals and customs and becoming part of it. Similarly, professionals and academics from disciplines

that study the built environment must also become performers to understand the relationship between human activity and space. We can only truly understand our environment through our instrument of spatial knowledge: the body. By consciously activating the body and performing everyday activities such as walking, resting or observing, as well as highly formal actions such as rituals or artistic performances, we can understand how our actions shape our environment and, consequently, how our environment shapes us.

Traditionally, the relationship between performance and space has been studied within the performing arts. However, only in recent decades have other disciplines, such as philosophy, anthropology, archaeology, cognitive sciences and architecture, become interested in this relationship. Typically, this interest has been isolated, ignoring the work of other disciplines and, above all, the resources that the performing arts can offer to investigate this relationship as pedagogical tools. The relationship between performance and space can only be studied in a transdisciplinary way. However, to date, no institution has examined this relationship in such a broad way, meaning collaboration between different disciplines in this field is rare and complicated. As Tim Ingold (2011, p. xi) suggests, “perhaps there is a discipline waiting to be defined and named where these fields meet”, or perhaps we are witnessing the beginning of a new approach to studying reality that could be termed “post-disciplinary.”

The first objective we set for *Performing Space* was to establish a platform for presenting, experimenting with and debating studies from different disciplines on performance and its environment. In other words, we wanted to generate an international network to discuss and disseminate the performative vision of space, which is essential for understanding and developing our environment. We chose to hold an international conference containing papers based on artistic or academic research, as well as workshops in which to experiment with different research techniques relating to the rapport between space and performance. The first conference was held in Nafplio, Greece, in 2022, as part of Pablo Berzal Cruz's postdoctoral research project between the Polytechnic University of Madrid and the University of the Peloponnese. The proceedings presented here are the result of the third edition of the event, *Performing Space 2024*.

The 2024 Edition

The third edition of the *Performing Space* project, in the form of the *Performing Space 2024* Conference and Workshops, took place in Nafplio, Greece, from 3 to 6 July 2024. Organised by the University of the Peloponnese's Departments of Theatre Studies, and Performing and Digital Arts, together with the Polytechnic University of Madrid, this edition was hosted by the University of the Peloponnese and brought together nearly 70 presentations and 40

workshop participants from over 20 countries. The number of participants practically doubled compared to the previous edition, reflecting the growing international and interdisciplinary interest in this project.

The conference was divided into 15 sessions, which brought together the different areas of work presented: Spatial Performativity (1); Performative Space (2); Spatial Embodiment (3); On the Collective (4); Memory and Belonging (5); Liminal Territories (6); The Politics of Space (7); Women's Space (8); Walking in the City (9); Performing the Stage and the Environment (10); Performing Architecture (11); Activating the Senses (12); Site-Specific (13); Reflections on Performance Space (14); and Cyberspace (15). Three workshops took place alongside the conference in this edition: The 4-day workshop *Mediterranean Spacing*, led by Professor Dorita Hannah; also lasting 4 days, *Space-Consciousness*, led by Professor Alberto Morell Sixto, Dr Kimvi Nguyen and Dr Gina Giotaki; and the 1-day workshop *The Body Image*, led by Dr Andonis Volanakis.

During the 2024 conference, many presentations reinforced several lines of work present in previous editions. These included questions about site-specific performance as an instrument of artistic research on the environment, more specifically on the place, with valuable contributions from different angles. The line of research on the use of performance in research and pedagogical methods on the built and natural environment was also reinforced. Essential questions of this project were explored in depth, such as spatial performativity – understood as the capacity of the environment to influence the behaviour and mental states of its occupants – and the performative qualities of space – whether scenic or urban. In addition, works on virtual space or augmented reality were also present in this edition.

As examples of new contributions to previously explored lines of research, we can highlight questions of belonging or the memory of place and the collective, in which studies were conducted on rituals associated with a place, as well as works such as site-specific performances and documentary theatre, which delved into these questions. Another line of work that was strongly introduced in this edition was the embodiment of space, particularly the role of the senses in this cognitive process. It is also worth accentuating the presentations on the politics of space, which in this edition were linked to the perspective of theatre studies. However, it would be desirable for future contributions to be broadened to include philosophical, economic, legislative and sociological perspectives.

The workshops in this edition focused primarily on the embodiment of space and on how the body expresses itself in space. In the *Space-Consciousness* workshop, participants created an interesting site-specific performance in Akronafplia, the upper part of Nafplio, where remains of Classical Greek, Byzantine, Venetian and Ottoman architecture can be found, exploring how the body expresses itself in response to the space it inhabits, both individually and collectively. Participants in the *Mediterranean Spacing* workshop explored

memory through sensory experiences of coastal liminal spaces — spaces of farewell, waiting and welcome. The workshop culminated in a beautiful and moving performance at sunset by the participants and many members of the Performing Space community at Karathona Beach near Nafplio. Lastly, *The Body Image* workshop took place in the Vouleftikon, an ancient mosque which served as the first parliament of the modern Greek state. The workshop explored the expression and representation of the body through painting, with astonishing results.

Figure 1

Image of the final performance of the Space- Consciousness workshop, led by Alberto Morell Sixto, Kimvi Nguyen and Gina Giotaki. Performing Space 2024. (Photo by Pablo Berzal).



Performing Space 2024 exceeded all of the organisation's expectations in terms of the number of participants and the high quality of its presentations. But the most important thing for the members of the organisation was the feeling of community that was generated among the participants during the event, creating bonds of friendship, as well as artistic and academic collaborations, that are still growing one year later. Proof of this can be seen in the next edition, Performing Space 2025, in which many participants of the 2024 conference will return, and many newcomers were attracted to participate through their connections with former participants. As mentioned earlier, our first objective was to create a community around the study of the relationship between performance and space: the Performing Space 2024 experience reveals and affirms that this community exists and grows every year.

We would like to express our gratitude to all the people, institutions and sponsors who have made this project possible once again. We would especially like to thank the participants for their trust in this initiative and for their valuable contributions.

Figure 2

Image of the final performance of the *Mediterranea Spacing* workshop, led by Dorita Hannah. *Performing Space 2024*. (Photo by Spyros Kousouris).

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