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24

Playing in the City: Practice and Poetics of Reclaiming Urban Space

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Abstract

Drawing from Henri Lefebvre's line of thought regarding the search for an *other* form of urbanity, as developed in his text *The Right to the City*, and aspects of Richard Schechner's theory on performativity, this article aims to process performative field actions as social and artistic practices of renegotiating the relationship with urban space and time. The study approaches key ideas from Henri Lefebvre's explorations concerning the city as a space of claiming a new urbanity, such as the transformative powers of art, playfulness and the imaginary, working on their intersections with Schechner's approaches to the concept of performativity, which identify play and ritual as inherent to every expression of performance. The proposed framework is utilised for the analysis of two case studies of artistic performative practices in public space: *Children's Games* (Francis Alÿs, 1999-ongoing) and *Revolution Bodies. Walking in the Centre of Athens* (Diana Sabri, Eleni Tzirtzilaki, 2014). The very nature of such practices — oscillating among daily life, art, social practice, and activism — is perceived and explored as a transitional space, necessary for unleashing the imaginary and engaging with *other* spatialities and expressions of the possible. As a result, they emerge as practices that encapsulate the transformative potential Lefebvre seeks in the context of reclaiming urban life, thus providing a research field rich with material for further elaboration and potential expansion of the discourse around urbanity.

Keywords: performativity, Lefebvre, public space, reclaiming

¹ This paper develops work originally undertaken during the author's Master's studies at National Technical University of Athens, School of Architecture.

Playing in the City

This essay explores aspects of the evolving discourse on urbanism and urban space, emphasising the interplay between urban society's development and the negotiation of urban space, drawing on Henri Lefebvre's ideas about the city as a space for claiming a new urbanity and its intersections with Richard Schechner's theories on performativity, before examining selected examples of performative art practices in public space. The nature of these practices — oscillating between everyday life, art, social engagement, and activism — provides the transitional space required for the liberation of the imaginary and the interaction with spatialities and expressions of the possible. It encompasses, in a way, the transformative dynamic that Lefebvre seeks within the framework of reclaiming urban life, thus providing a field of research with abundant material for further processing and possibilities for expanding the discussion on urbanity, as presented within the current context.

The first part of the study synthesises an understanding of the emancipatory role of performance as an artistic practice, referencing Lefebvre's *The Right to the City* and Schechner's concepts of play and ritual. Following Lefebvre's analysis, urbanity is explored at the level of everyday life and the claim for a transformed urban experience. Lefebvre emphasises the interrelation of social reality and art, envisioning the city as a dynamic work of art to be collectively experienced and reimagined, while Schechner's theories of performativity are also employed, highlighting central concepts such as play and ritual, which are argued to underlie all forms of performance. These frameworks are used to signify performance as a social and spatial practice that shapes and reclaims urban experience.

The second part examines case studies of performative art practices in urban spaces, specifically Francis Alÿs's *Children's Games* (1999-ongoing) and the walking action *Revolution Bodies* (Athens, 2014) by Diana Sabri and Eleni Tzirtzilaki. The study of both works allows the emergence of aspects of the urban experience within the emancipatory framework set by Lefebvre and under which they are approached, while simultaneously presenting in a characteristic and particularly tangible way the concepts that Schechner's positions employ. The selected cases foreground the temporal and experiential dimensions of urban life, through which the city emerges as a lived and contested space where art becomes a mode of claiming, transforming, and reimagining urbanity.

Ultimately, the present exploration aims to broaden the understanding and signification of urban space through the lens of performative art practices, considering their socio-political context and transformative potential.

Praxis and Poiesis I: In search of the movable centrality

Henri Lefebvre's 1967 article *The Right to the City* explores the transformative potential of urban spaces during a time of social and political upheaval. Lefebvre argues that life in the city should be seen as a work of art and emphasises the importance of reclaiming urban space and time through creative and emancipatory processes. Throughout his text, he acknowledges the obligation of theoretical reflection to redefine the forms, functions, and structures of the city, as well as social needs, including the human need for play as a non-productive activity. This emphasis on the need to construct a world through the imaginary, which is rooted in creative activity, in a way transcends the fragmentation of labour, as happens with manifestations such as sexuality, sports, art, or knowledge.

Leaving aside representation, ornamentation and decoration, art can become *praxis* and *poiesis* on a social scale: the art of living in the city as work of art. (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 173).

Lefebvre also discusses the role of art in transforming reality and restoring the sense of work. He envisions a new humanism that emerges from the reforming of the city² and life within it, proposing the idea of "ephemeral cities" and "movable centralities" to challenge traditional urban structures. Ultimately, Lefebvre outlines the concept of an emancipated urban subject that shapes the city and is in turn shaped by it, emphasising the dynamic interplay among individual subjectivities, collectivities, and urban spaces.

Why not oppose ephemeral cities to the eternal city, and movable centrality to stable centres? All audacities can be premised. Why limit these propositions only to the morphology of time and space? They could also include the way of living in the city and the development of the urban on this basis (p. 155).

Praxis and Poiesis II: On the performance continuum

The concept of performativity, influenced by the socio-political conditions of the late 20th century, has significantly impacted the fields of intellect and art. Richard Schechner defines performance as "restored behaviour", or "twice-behaved behaviour" (Schechner, 1985, p. 36, 150), while associating it with being, doing, the exhibition of doing, and the interpretation of this exhibition (2013, p. 28), highlighting its repeatability and symbolic nature.³

² Lefebvre defines the city as "the projection of society onto the ground" (p.109). This definition brings attention to the implicit signification of the physical space (the ground) through the social relations and regulations constituting society.

³ In an even more general framework, Goffman defines performance as any activity of a given participant in a given situation that serves to exert influence, in any way, on any of the other participants (Goffman, 1959, 15–16).

Schechner identifies seven key functions of performance: entertainment, the creation of beauty, identity formation or modification, community building, healing, teaching, and the management of the sacred or demonic. These wide-ranging functions suggest that performativity can encompass nearly all expressions of the human condition and behaviour, a scope intensified within the framework of increasingly mediated contemporary communication.

He also suggests that two central concepts permeate the broader spectrum of performative behaviour and exist in its individual expressions: the concepts of play and ritual. According to Schechner, the performance of rituals plays a significant role in managing transitional periods throughout the human experience and in the formation and maintenance of a community. At the same time, he recognises in ritual the dynamic of creating a place of transcendence by expanding experience to another space and time, suspending the limitations of social reality.

As for play, Schechner goes as far as defining performance as “ritualised behaviour conditioned by play” (Schechner, 2013, p. 89), emphasising its inseparability from its playful aspect. With its spontaneity and lightness, play contrasts yet balances ritual’s gravity, while both enable transitions to otherness through the activation of the imaginary, fostering creativity and new modes of experience. Within this study, particular attention is given to the non-productive quality of play (Caillois, 1961, p. 5,10) (Schechner, 2005, pp. 9-10): unlike economically driven processes that aim to produce wealth or material goods, play resists productivity and instead restructures behaviour in imaginative and transformative ways.

Playing in the city I: Children’s Games

Francis Alÿs⁴ is a Mexico-based Belgian artist who explores urban space and human activity through his work. He focuses on everyday practices, particularly walking, performing “paseos”, walks that “resist the subjugation of public space” (Tate, n.d.) and question city structures (Vitali, 2018, p. 237). His work investigates urban tensions and the interplay between the poetic and political.

The selected project, *Children’s Games*, spans twenty-six years so far (1999-2025) (Alÿs, n.d.) and captures scenes of children’s play at various global locations and quite different landscapes, from peaceful cities to war-torn areas. This series brings attention to the contrast of the light-hearted nature of childhood backed by children’s imagination and the human-made environments that host it.

Children’s Games include playfulness as a central aspect of performance, simultaneously aligning with Schechner’s theories. Play, in this case, appears not as a

⁴ For more on the work of Francis Alÿs, see Bloemheuvel & Guldemond (2019).

symbolic artistic gesture, but as an authentic quality of childhood, expressed through lightness and spontaneity. Yet, when framed through the artist's selective gaze and spatial choices, these moments take on poetic and political dimensions. Children's activities can thus be read as oscillating between play and performance, depending as well on the viewer's perspective — an essential element of all performative actions. For instance, the simple hand game of two girls with stones in Kathmandu reveals not only playful spontaneity but also ritualistic repetition, suggesting a deeper performative quality.

Viewing this example as a performative practice, several of Schechner's functions become evident: identity formation, community creation, and the production of beauty. Correlating these elements with spatial aspects of performance highlights how children uniquely experience and appropriate environments, echoing Lefebvre's vision of urban life as a work of art. Through this framing, Alÿs reveals spaces of the possible, where a child's engagement with space reveals parallel possibilities of existence. In doing so, he reintroduces playfulness as a liberating dynamic, suggesting its emancipatory potential even within adult urban life.

Playing in the City II: Revolution Bodies

The second performative action examined took place in the centre of Athens, organised by the Nomadic Architecture Network, a group that intervenes in urban spaces with actions that blend art and architecture, focusing on areas in crisis, migration, displacement, gender differences, and the claim of common goods. The actions of this group, through embodied performance and the spatial transformations it brings to the urban landscape, express the political existence of the individual subjectivities that comprise it, as well as the ephemeral collectivities created within it.

Revolution Bodies. Walking in the centre of Athens, organised by Diana Sabri and Eleni Tzirtzilaki on April 3, 2014, involved a route from the Free Self-Managed Theatre Embros to the National Garden, with stops at significant locations such as Kotzia Square and Omonia Square. During the walk, readings and narrations related to the history of these locations were made, addressing events such as the occupation of the Municipal Theatre by refugees of the Asia Minor catastrophe (1922), the murder of Alexandros Grigoropoulos (2008), or the events of December 1944 in Athens. The action critiqued the dominant narratives of the time, such as *Rethink Athens* and the *Discovering the National Garden* programme, which marginalised residents and their rights to the city.

This performative action, through walking practices, organised an ephemeral collectivity that brought back parts of urban memory, intensifying the emotional charge for the participants. The action blurred the boundaries between everyday/social and artistic

practice, creating a transitional space of dialogue with an *other* urbanity. The collective wandering body, created during the performative action, reclaimed multiple temporalities of past, present, and future narratives, emphasising the non-productive appropriation of urban space. At the same time, the readings and narrations reinforced the collective memory of resistance and political claims within the city, forming a community through shared ritual processes and reappropriating the urban narrative.

Conclusion

This essay has explored Henri Lefebvre's ideas on urbanity, focusing on the liberating dynamics of claiming urban space and time, and experiencing the city as *work (oeuvre)* (Lefebvre, 1996, p.66) rather than an exchange value. Throughout this investigation, the concept of art is fundamental, as, for Lefebvre, it embodies precisely this transformative dynamic, transcending the fragmentation of productive labour. At the same time, the materialisation of this reformatory force has been traced in the formation of a potentially collective urban body. These expressions of the liberation of creativity and the imaginary were approached in relation to Schechner's analyses of performativity. The connecting link between the two frameworks has been identified in the concept of playfulness, which, according to Schechner — in a manner that aligns with Lefebvre's narrative (regarding the qualities of work versus product) — is characterised, among other things, by non-productivity.

Within this framework, the study has examined performative in-situ art practices, highlighting their ability to open transitions to other places and their role in facilitating the understanding of abstract meanings. This outcoming theorised playfulness can be admitted to some extent to have lost its dominant quality — that of the liberated imagination that transcends everyday experience and introduces novel worlds. However, the return to literal children's play activates through memory and emotional experience the precise perception of playfulness as the light mechanism that encompasses in its authentic form the unimaginable dynamics of transcending war landscapes. The successive urban temporalities were also revealed as an integral element of experiencing the city as work. The emphasis on the appropriation of time, through the multilayered temporal narratives developed during the performative walk *Revolution Bodies*, intensifies the activation of collective memory and reinforces the formation of a collective body that reclaims urban space and the layers of its narrative.

In an attempt — albeit with considerable reservation and even greater abstraction — of condensing Lefebvre's approach of urbanisation, it might be suggested that one of its major achievements lies precisely in having shed the weight of its own signification. In the face of a heavy, serious, forceful, and rigid system of capitalist production, Lefebvre counters with

the light, creative, childlike, and dreamlike play. Without altering the essence or substance of his radical proposal for a renewed appropriation of urban experience, it is the very manner of claiming it that ensures access to data and dimensions which the sterility of design is incapable of foreseeing. Perhaps it is precisely this capacity to unfold potential other worlds that renders the category of performance — suspended between social practice and art — a promising meeting point for the reflection of theorists and the praxis of poets.

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