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Let's Inject Some Randomness into the City: Reflecting on Eliza Soroga's Site-Specific Performances in London and Prague

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Let's Inject Some Randomness into the City: Reflecting on Eliza Soroga's Site-Specific Performances in London and Prague

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Abstract

From 2014 to 2023 I created a sequence of three site-specific performances developed in public spaces. Making art in public spaces is a purposeful choice; the real world, as opposed to the theatre world is subject to randomness, an element which adds unpredictability to the artistic practice as a desired challenge and risk.

The first performance was in London Bridge (London) entitled *Breakfast on London Bridge* (2014). It experimented with a simple rhythmic contradiction: how a slow-pace everyday action of having breakfast blends in with the quick-pace of a rush hour on a Monday morning.

The second one, in Oxford Circus (London), entitled *Women in Agony* (2015) intended to make a comment on urban alienation, neurosis, uniformity and consumerism. Sixteen women gathered in the middle of the pavement amongst fashion victims in rush hour and simultaneously screamed.

The third one took place in Prague's historic centre entitled *IN QR WE TRUST* (2023) reflecting on post COVID-19 changes and the rapid digitalisation of our everyday lives. The latter was part of the Prague Quadrennial Performance Design programme.

In this essay, I would like to reflect on these works by posing some research questions: What is the dialogue between everyday life and Performance and the urge to create a rare encounter with passers-by? How do we conceive of lived public experiences as revealing the possibilities for re-inventing public spaces? How do we incorporate the reality of the chosen sites reaching out for the *poetics of places* by using the site-sensitive approach into the making? What does unpredictability and randomness have to offer to the experience of public space?

These performances witness the possibility of a new public sphere, open to the unpredictable vitality of spontaneous authentic reactions. This is achieved through injecting randomness, spontaneity and risk into a metabolism stunned by repetition and routine.

Keywords: site specific performance, re-inventing public spaces, randomness and the city, Prague Quadrennial Performance Design 2023

Let's Inject Some Randomness into the City

In this essay, given my experience working in public spaces, I would like to reflect on the dialogue between everyday life and performance, and the urge to create a rare encounter with passers-by. I will discuss the conception of lived public experiences as revealing the possibilities for re-inventing the public realm. I will also consider how the reality of the chosen sites is incorporated into the work, reaching toward a "poetics of places." I will then examine the role that unpredictability and randomness play in the experience of public space.

Breakfast on London Bridge (2014)

The performance experimented with a simple rhythmic contradiction: how a slow-pace everyday action of having breakfast blends in with the quick-pace of a rush hour on a Monday morning. Before implementing the idea, we stayed on site for long hours observing its rhythmic patterns and/in relation to our inner body rhythms.

The rhythm analyst will not be obliged to jump from the inside to the outside of observed bodies; he should come to listen to them as a whole and unify them by taking his own rhythms as a reference: by integrating the outside with the inside and vice versa. (Lefebvre, 2004/1992, p. 19)

We remained silent and also chatted while observing the passers-by's reactions. The site underwent the transformation from weekdays to weekends. We chose to work at the busiest moment; the rush hour on a Monday morning. The choice of costumes and props was designed to fit the old British 'tea culture'. London Bridge serves as a symbolic and physical connector between two distinct urban spheres: the northern 'Bank' district, characterised by its office culture, and the southern, more affordable residential area where many office workers reside. To be placed at the centre of the bridge was a stenographic choice: we wanted to incorporate the reality of the site and thus be inseparable from it without being decorative or illustrative.

Neoliberal systems have produced what Harvey calls "time-space compression." People rush to work and public spaces transform into places-in-between home and work.

I use the word 'compression' because a strong case can be made that the history of capitalism has been characterized by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us. (Harvey, 1989, p. 240).

As a response to the above, we performed a slow-paced breakfast for six hours in silence. Passers-by were mostly indifferent — they had to rush to work — but some stood there and twitted photos. It became viral on twitter for a while. People didn't

approach us at any time except a police car that stopped and asked; “So you are just having a tea?” We nodded and they said, “Enjoy your tea, have a nice day!”

Figure 1

Breakfast on London Bridge, a performance by Eliza Soroga and B Hanusova. London Bridge, 2014. Photo by Manolis Mavris.



Women in Agony (2015)

This performance took place at Oxford Circus in London, one of the most commercially active streets in the world. Sixteen women gathered in the middle of the pavement amongst fashion victims during the rush hour and simultaneously screamed. The intention was to comment on urban alienation, neurosis, uniformity and consumerism. Sennett (2003) states “in Marxist terms *commodity fetishism* identified from mass production and homogeneity of appearance” (p. 20). Fashion industries make people feel the need to be unique and special, but they all end up looking exactly the same. The performance was first filmed on a quiet Sunday morning — the only occasion for which we were granted permission by the City of London — and was subsequently repeated multiple times with different performers during various rush-hour periods.

The choice of location was proposed by B. Hanusova, with whom we had previously collaborated on *Breakfast*. We met at Oxford Circus station and agreed to walk blindfolded from there along Regent Street to Piccadilly Circus station. It was a dreadful experience but we committed to it until the end. This heightened our perception of the city’s soundscape and amplified our sense of its dynamic, fast-paced character. The concept for the performance emerged for me immediately after the walk, once the blindfolds were taken off.

Owing to the considerable logistical demands of the project, it was decided that I would develop it as a solo work.

Figure 2

Women in Agony, A performance by Eliza Soroga, Oxford Circus, London, 2015. Photo by Rocio Chacon.



Broadly inspired by the Expanding Theatre movement, the idea developed following the tradition of “*theatrum mundi*” and Balzac’s *La Comédie humaine*¹, where the city can be seen as a stage, and of course the Fluxus movement, and Happenings, which blurred the boundaries between life and art. As Maciunas (1963) states: “Promote a revolutionary flood and tide in art, promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART reality to be grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals”.

For me it is important to create art, in this case, a flash mob, that can be witnessed by everyone in public space; a living public experience which intends to twist the expectations of its viewers and puzzle them as its form is designed to remain unclassified. Is it a protest? Is it an advertising campaign? Is it art?²

¹ In *La Comédie humaine*, Balzac describes the world as a stage where individuals play roles, and society functions as a grand theatrical production. This aligns with the classical concept of “*theatrum mundi*,” which views the world as a stage and life as a play.

² When I was developing this work, I got an offer from a women’s clothing brand to use this action as part of their advertising campaign. Inevitably, “it’s the non-conformists, not the conformists, who

This performance intends to investigate the vague line between everyday life and performance. It was conceived in a site-specific manner: first the place was chosen, then the artwork followed. Making art in public spaces is a purposeful choice; the real world, as opposed to the theatre world, is subject to randomness, an element which adds unpredictability to the artistic practice as a desired challenge and risk. Some people screamed along with us but most of them maintained silence. It was magical to witness this place transforming, the noise abruptly disappearing for a few seconds. The feeling was ritualistic, and the experience unfolded overall like a ceremony.

IN QR WE TRUST (2023)

IN QR WE TRUST (formerly entitled *I Like 2020*) took place in Prague's historic centre, the Old Town Square, and reflected on post COVID-19 changes and the rapid digitalisation of everyday life. It was part of the 2023 Prague Quadrennial Performance Design programme.

A mixed crowd of performers from different cultural backgrounds, ages and professions took over the centre of Prague, all wearing QR code T-shirts from their Covid certificates³. When they reached the Old Town Square, they simultaneously screamed.

The performance acquired its significance through its presentation in public space, where it was directed towards passersby and intended to be experienced collectively. The shared reality of the pandemic provides a common point of reference: similarly, this performance is designed to be experienced in public space and made accessible to all, whether as participants or as observers.

The streets of Prague served as the scenography of this work, functioning as a shared space for collective movement and the creation of memorable experiences, while simultaneously linking the homes in which people were compelled to isolate during the pandemic. In a symbolic realm, they stand for any capital city centre; they create a kind of opening, a possibility for a “derive” in psychogeographical terms.

One of the basic situationist practices is the *dérive* [literally: ‘drifting’], a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. (Debord, 1958, para. 1)

are driving consumer spending. Brand identity is all about product differentiation; it’s about setting the product apart from the others” (Heath & Potter, 2005, p. 106).

³ These certificates are issued after they have been vaccinated against COVID-19, tested negative or recovered from the virus.

Taking its cue from the curatorial concept's phrase "Think of what urgently needs to be performed"⁴ under the theme of RARE experiences of the Prague Quadrennial 2023 and the pandemic, this promenade performance invited people to gather, walk together and scream.

Figure 3

*IN QR WE TRUST, A performance by Eliza Soroga, Old Town Square, Prague, 2023.
Photo by Jiri Kralovec.*



Several months after the performance had concluded, I began to consider how the work might assume a more general scope, less directly tied to the pandemic. The QR code alone was sufficient to function as a metaphor, particularly in light of the radical shifts towards digitalisation of everyday life witnessed in recent years.

In this context, the individual's physical identity became secondary to their digital imprint. During the COVID-19 pandemic, access to freedom was often contingent upon a simple scan. The title of the work derives from this context: just as the phrase "In God we trust" signifies faith in a higher authority, QR codes have come to function as new forms of authority in contemporary life.

⁴ The performance was curated by Carolina E. Santo.

Conclusion

This essay examined three site-specific performances presented in the public realm, with a focus on the “poetics of place” characteristic of each location. Each performance was analysed according to a set of key factors: 1) the dialogue between everyday life and performance, 2) the urge to create a rare encounter with passers-by, 3) how public spaces can be potentially re-invented through these actions 4) the significant role that unpredictability and randomness play in shaping the experience of public space.

These performances witnessed the possibility of a new public sphere, open to the unpredictable vitality of spontaneous authentic reactions. This is achieved through injecting randomness, spontaneity and risk into a metabolism stunned by repetition and routine.

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