

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

(2026)

PERFORMANCE & SPACE III. PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2025 CONFERENCE

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PERFORMANCE & SPACE III

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PERFORMING SPACE 2025 CONFERENCE



Performing Space Association University of the Peloponnese

2026

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doi: [10.12681/ps2023.9964](https://doi.org/10.12681/ps2023.9964)

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Portable Dramaturgies Performing Globalisation's Un/Specific Ground

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Abstract

In this paper I consider portable dramaturgies that are specifically staged within the urban fabric and facilitated through the use of headphones. By portable dramaturgies I indicate performance practices that can be adapted for different cities around the globe without changing their core conceptual bases. Writing of Rimini Protokoll's *Remote X*, Konstantinos Thomaidis (2017) proposes that the voice in the headphones “serves to construct the urban space as the scenography of our *theatre*” (p. 5). Accordingly, each time this dramaturgy is repeated, a new scenography emerges; yet with each repetition the scenography of the global-urban fabric is extended: the city-streets emerge as elements in the globalised scenography of this site-un/specific theatre. Following Laura Levin (2014), I seek to think through portable dramaturgies as practices in which participants “perform ground.” Performing ground, in Levin's conceptualisation denotes “performance strateg[ies] in which the human body commingles with or is presented as a direct extension of its setting” (p. 13). The argument I wish to pursue here suggests that in the context of portable dramaturgies, as spectators/participants commingle with their urban surroundings they are constructed as performing subjects in the scenography of the global city — performing subjects camouflaged in cityscapes, but also performing subjects that stand apart from the cityscapes. Against the above backdrop, I ask: *what kinds of performances might the global-urban fabric require from its dwellers and how might such dramaturgies both camouflage and emphasise neoliberal globalisation's quotidian scenographies? How might the voices in the headphones and the subjects performing their instructions negotiate the experience(s) of globalisation?*

Keywords: Rimini Protokoll, camouflage, surveillance capitalism, global-urban fabric

Portable Dramaturgies

A horde of pedestrians wearing headphones walks across a city. They stop, observe, applaud, race, dance, jump on and off the subway or a bus or a train; they emerge in public as a spontaneous and accidental community of individuals. Bodies move in unison or individually, together or against one another as they traverse the urban fabric; they “watch each other, make individual decisions and yet remain always part of a group” as they are guided by a “synthetic voice — as we know them from GPS navigators” (Rimini Protokoll, 2023). The above is an attempt to describe Rimini Protokoll's *Remote X* (2013-present), an audio walk designed and realised by Kaegi and Karrenbauer that has been staged in more than thirty-eight cities around the globe; a performance practice that can be adapted for different cities around the globe without changing its core conceptual basis — a portable dramaturgy.

In this essay I focus on *Remote X* in order to unpick the ways in which such portable dramaturgies might perform global cities as the scenographies of globalisation. The discussion that follows is organised around or within three notions that seek to “frame” it in different ways: the voice, camouflage and ground. Each frame offers a different conceptual lens through I think through the specific example as well as wider questions regarding how portable dramaturgies operate within — and perform — the global-urban fabric. *How might the voice raise questions about the place of the human in cities that are increasingly governed by predictive algorithms? How might such dramaturgies un/mask globalisation's quotidian scenographies and the role of individuals in them and in relation to them? How might the voice in the headphones and the subjects performing its instructions stage the experience of globalisation?*

The Voice

Welcome to *Remote Berlin*. (...) You came to understand me. I'm programmed to understand you. You weigh between 50 and 120 kilos; you are between 1,5 and 2 meters tall; your IQ is between 70 and 130. (...) When you think of my voice, you probably want to think of a tongue. Or you want to think of lips? (...) But I have no lips. I have no mouth. I have no head. (...) Sorry, I am not human, but I will try to be your friend.¹

¹ All quotations from the *Remote X*, come from the recorded version of *Remote Berlin 2015* (*Remote Berlin*).

This is how the voice introduces her(later-to-become-him)self to the participants. Or, this is how the voice introduces “users” or “players,” to use Kaegi's own terminology (Rimmele), to the augmented reality of the performance. Central in this encounter between the embodied presence of the players and the disembodied voice that guides them — between human intelligence and artificial intelligence —, the latter seems to suggest, is mutual understanding. According to Thomaidis “this voice is a problem,” in that it poses a series of “problems” to the players: it is in turns “personable, poetic, instructive, authoritarian, malleable, untrustworthy and uplifting” (2017, p. 7). It is a problem, furthermore, because it professes to understand humans by offering quantitative data, while “happily drawing attention” to the fact that it is not produced by a human body (Thomaidis, 2017, p. 7): “Sorry, I am not human,” it says and one cannot be sure if it is indeed sorry it is not human or if it apologises because, as it is not human, it cannot empathise with beings with throats, mouths, and bodies.

Despite (or perhaps because) of these warnings, for approximately ninety minutes a herd of fifty human bodies follows instructions issued by this artificially generated voice. Humans play along in this game that seems to replicate the ways we use or cling to technology when driving, walking, using infra-structures, consuming or generating digital footprints and feeding predictive algorithms; in short, when we conform to technologies that profess to make our lives easier and/or safer — technologies that, as per Zuboff's discussion on surveillance capitalism, rely on “an increasingly ubiquitous computational architecture of ‘smart’ networked devices, things, and spaces” (2019, p. 8). Surveillance capitalism, Zuboff argues, “unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data” (2019, p. 8). As such, it constitutes and expresses a shift in capitalist economies that, by way of gathering our data, seems to shape behaviours:

surveillance capitalists discovered that the most-predictive behavioral data come from intervening in the state of play in order to nudge, coax, tune, and herd behavior toward profitable outcomes. (...) With this reorientation from knowledge to power, it is no longer enough to automate information flows *about us*; the goal now it to *automate us* (Zuboff, 2019, p. 8).

By rendering technologies meaningful for its own profit, surveillance capitalism shapes and produces individuals by way of predicting algorithms: if the algorithm can predict my choices based on my digital footprint, then my choices and my behaviour appear as an extension of the control exerted by the algorithm.

The voice in *Remote X* often offers opportunities for decision-making to players: should I go left, or right? Nevertheless, in the end the voice will decide on the route by affirming or

correcting the human decision. Artificial intelligence here appears as a friendly companion on our journey through the cityscape; a companion that offers itself to explain the urban fabric to us users of the city. “While the artificial intelligence observes human behaviour from a distance,” Rimini Protokoll suggest, “the voice step by step sounds more familiar” (Rimini Protokoll, 2013). Further down the tour, the voice invites players to consider uploading all their “data” onto her and outlive the biological constraints of human nature. *Is this life camouflaged as artificial intelligence or artificial intelligence camouflaged as life?*

Camouflage

In *Performing Ground*, Levin makes a compelling argument “for reading camouflage as a *performative strategy*, as a theoretical frame for analysing contemporary performance practices and the performance of self in everyday life” (2014, p. 5). If camouflage becomes the frame through which we read performance practice, she suggests, what also becomes apparent is the negotiation between the performing body and the environment in which it acts or of which it is constituted. Camouflage “implies a process of performative correspondence: embedding oneself, or becoming embedded, in the surrounding environment through the physical and visual stylization of the body” (Levin, 2014, p. 4). In this sense, such a reading of performance practices involves an understanding of the performing body that is located not against its backdrop, but as part of it; it involves and implies “a *remapping* of the possible terrain of subjectivity” (Levin, 2014, p. 6). By being, therefore, the art of disappearance, camouflage is also an act of recognition of what is invisible — what and who is made invisible and what and who makes themselves invisible.

Camouflage becomes apparent in *Remote X* on the level of the corporeality of the performance: assuming that the bodies of the players are the performing bodies, they blend in the urban environment — they do not present an image that stands out of the ordinary. Similarly, if we assume that the players are spectators of the city's spectacle, what they observe is the daily routine of the city — its daily rhythms, patterns and behaviours. It is the mediation of these layers of embodiment by the voice that makes both the players and the city apparent as performing bodies/entities. Precisely because neither the city nor the players seek to stand out, both the city and the players emerge as camouflaged performances. By “*reorganiz[ing]* the aural field available to us,” Thomaidis contends, “the voice serves to construct the urban space as the scenography of our *theatre*” (2017, p. 5). What this reorganised aural field reveals here is the very theatricality of the self and its (urban) environment; that is, the performative ways in which the subject is shaped in relation to the environment in which it acts — the ways it blends in or stands out of the picture.

Camouflage, moreover, works in *Remote X* also as a way of making the strategies of surveillance capitalism visible. Zuboff suggests that surveillance capitalism evades recognition as a “new actor in history” because “the existing categories (...) fall short in identifying and contesting the most crucial and unprecedented facts of this new regime” (2019, p. 14). By camouflaging itself as a theatrical convention — as a mere game — and evoking the theatricality of the quotidian, the voice makes visible the realities of surveillance capitalism and the ways they have indeed become the background — the quotidian environment in which individuals perform themselves; the ways, that is, in which artificial intelligence as employed by capitalism shapes processes of subjectivation and has thus been rendered invisible in daily life. This argument is further enhanced when the voice invites users to observe the city as if they were a security camera or to use their phone to take a picture of the herd’s reflection on a glass surface. The city is revealed through the “eyes” of artificial intelligence and as a mere setting for generating online content; it is revealed as the scenography of surveillance capitalism’s theatre.

Ground

In each of its iterations, *Remote X* takes users on a tour through sites that can be found on each and any city: a cemetery, a bank, a hospital, a park, some kind of transportation, a theatre, streets, a church or something equivalent. It is, essentially, a tour of globalisation’s non-places that, according to Augé, are globalisation’s privileged spaces (2008, pp. 77-86). In doing so, it invokes the global-urban fabric — “each new site-specific version builds upon the dramaturgy of the previous city,” as per the company’s admission (Rimini Protokoll, 2023). In this tour of globalisation’s privileged grounds, *Remote X* does not seem to attempt to make places out of these non-places, it does not invite users to connect with these sites, even if that might happen in the process (cf. Yasur, 2022, p. 49); rather, it seems to emphasise the experience of/in the global-urban fabric.

But whose experience of globalisation does Remote X stage? Which subject is the ideal user of this augmented experience of the global-urban fabric? Massey considers the “power geometry of time-space compression”:

different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to the (...) flows and interconnections [implied in time-space compression]. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn’t, although that is an important element of it; it is also about power in relation to the flows and the movement (1994, p. 149).

What matters, she argues, is who or what holds the privilege of mobility but also, and perhaps more significantly who holds power over mobility. As such, Massey seeks to acknowledge

those whose (geographical, ethnic, gendered, economic) position in globalisation's geographies excludes them from the flows of mobility and interconnectedness — or the flows of access implied in the concept of time-space compression, but also the ways in which one's privileges are the reason for another's exclusion.

The voice in *Remote X* does not seem to recognise difference — all humans are simply humans, there is no other principle of classification, no specific identity marker involved here. While in some ways seems to erase difference — an almost utopian sense of equality, we are all members of the herd —, this act of camouflage veils the fact that this is not a universal experience. Or, rather, it stages a specific kind of experience camouflaging it as the universal experience of the global city; an experience that is close to that of the civic transnational subject discussed by McKinnie — a largely white and privileged global-urban citizenry (2009, p. 124). In addition, this act of camouflage may provide another way of looking at the problem that is the voice: camouflaged as the synthetic voice of artificial intelligence, it reveals itself as yet another iteration of the European gaze and sketches a scenography that overlooks the complexities generating the specific social, economic, ethnic and gender inequalities and experiences within each city; inequalities that are in turn co-dependent on its position in the wider geographies of globalisation. In traversing this scenography, the users of *Remote X* walk on site-un/specific grounds.

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