

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

Redefining the Change in Democracy: A Site-specific Deambulatory Performance in Sotiria Hospital's Park

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doi: [10.12681/ps2023.9965](https://doi.org/10.12681/ps2023.9965)

29

Redefining the Change in Democracy: A Site-specific Deambulatory Performance in Sotiria Hospital's Park

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Abstract

The paper examines the site-specific performance *Redefining the Change in Democracy* in Sotiria Hospital's park (Athens Epidaurus Festival 2024). Conceived as an artwork within an academic setting, the composition interrogates the intersection of care, health, and democratic structures within a historically charged institutional landscape. The argument is grounded in a theoretical framework that draws on ritual performance (van Gennep, 1960), spatial theory (Lefebvre, 1991; Foucault, 1986), and S.Bloch's psychosomatic approach to affect. Positioned as practice-as-research (PaR), the project treats embodied methodologies as instruments of critical inquiry and pedagogy. It argues that such site-responsive compositions can reimagine public space and creative technique as liminal, affective, socially engaged encounters that exceed conventional performance boundaries, modelling a hybrid paradigm at once aesthetic, interdisciplinary, and civically oriented.

The article is structured into the following sections: the background and context of the performance, the methodological and theoretical framework of the creative work, and the conclusions that illuminate the outcomes of the research.

Keywords: site-specific performance, embodied devised methodology, practice as research, liminality, health narratives.

Analytical Creative Process of the Performance *Redefining the Change in Democracy*

Background and Context

Redefining the Change in Democracy emerged as a critical inquiry into healthcare and civic responsibility within an era characterised by intensifying pressures on democratic societies, notably fiscal austerity and the systematic disinvestment in public care infrastructures. Conceived as a course-based, practice-as-research project, the project aimed to catalyse in-class discourse that could extend into the public domain. The work was performed at the park of *Sotiria* Hospital as a part of the *What We Owe Democracy* event for the Athens Epidaurus Festival 2024¹ co-produced with the Municipal Theatre of Piraeus and the Department of Theatre Studies of the University of Peloponnese.² This paper aims to elucidate the creative development of the performance, detailing its theoretical foundations, dramaturgical choices, and the specific physical methodologies employed.

Sotiria Hospital's Park: A lived space

Sotiria Hospital, established in 1902 as Greece's inaugural public tuberculosis sanatorium, has been associated with historical traumas. In the wake of the 1922 Asia Minor Catastrophe, the park served as an improvised shelter for displaced families, whereas during the Greek Civil War, parts of the grounds reportedly functioned as an execution site for political dissidents. With the post-war advent of streptomycin and related therapies, the hospital shifted from a locus of mortality to a centre of treatment, and it has since remained a key facility for major respiratory disease, including COVID-19 and lung cancer. The historical and affective sedimentations have constituted *Sotiria* as an *espace vécu* (*lived space*) laden with emotional and political affect. Exceeding both its intended medical functions (*conceived space*), its routines (*perceived space*) (Lefebvre, 1991) and scarred by trauma, the site is perceived with functional indeterminacy between the organisational order and the contingencies of social practices across time.

¹ Athens Epidaurus Festival. (2024). *What we owe democracy* [Programme brochure]. https://aefestival.gr/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/DEMOCRACY_final_logos-1.pdf

² The performance emerged from the practice-based university course *Physical Theatre Technique: The performer into the Open Space*, led by movement director and teatrologist Antonia Vasilakou in collaboration with dramaturg Anna Tsihli. The student-performers were integral to the project's creative process throughout.

Methodological Process: Embodied Devising Tools, Dramaturgy and Theoretical Framework

Grounded in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (2012/1945) and Bourdieu's notion of *embodied practice* (Bourdieu, 1977), setting aside the Cartesian split between mind and body, the methodological protocol adopted an embodied practice-as-research framework to facilitate a fluid negotiation between educational objectives and creative outcomes. Prioritising a shared, resonant collective voice rather than an individual authorial perspective, a devising method was employed. Without a pre-existing script, the process deployed a research-based devised dramaturgy, mobilising participants'³ personal narratives into iterative studio praxis across successive cycles of experimentation and critical reflection.

An interview-based method was implemented. Drawing from documentary-devised principles or of ethno-dramatic strategies, in which personal testimonies operate not merely as a display but as a potent mode of inquiry and meaning-making (Saldaña, 2011), the students-performers engaged in dialogic improvisation that activated an interplay of memory, text, and embodied response. Employing rotating roles among the interviewer, interviewee, and two observers tasked with documenting verbal and physical responses, the protocol ensured balanced participation and fostered a multiplicity of perspectives.

A corpus of twenty-seven (27) first-person, present-tense prompts was developed, from which each participant was invited to select ten for reflection and response.⁴

Critical reflections emerged regarding perceived lacunae in the support and guidance provided by the Greek public health system during exigent periods for individuals and their families. A pivotal unanswered question emerged: *how a democratic society can credibly assert its values, when essential health and social care provisions remain inaccessible due to educational disparities, employment inequities, or geographical remoteness?* This context becomes even more relevant when considering the ongoing reforms and systemic restructuring initiated after the Greek financial crisis, which continue to impact healthcare provision significantly.

³ The student-performers involved in the project were Konstantina Bournia, Niki Damaskinou, Vasiliki Konstantaki, Katerina Kouni, Alexandra Stergianni, Konstantina Papapolymerou.

⁴Example prompts included: "What do I remember?", "What do I believe?", "What do I respect?", "What do I want?", "What do I hate?", "What do I forget?", "What do I hold on to?", and "What do I let go of?"

The Body as Archive

Performers' personal testimonies provided a shared archive for later compositional decisions. The interview protocol operated as a conduit of *habitus* manifestation (Bourdieu, 1977). It mobilised the dispositions that contour narration such as somatic bearing and affect, into shareable content. In practice, it functioned as a generative apparatus, as a matrix from which actions, emotions, and textual material derived.

Such a devising dramaturgy consequently facilitated the student-performers in cultivating an "somatic mode of attention" (Csordas, 1993, pp. 135-156). Within this state, the act of questioning and responding became a mediated form of attunement to and perception of language, text, and the corporeal presence of the self and others. This ultimately enabled the systematic integration of "language-plus-gesture" codes into a specific score, providing a platform for responses, perspectives, and emotions tested in a safe environment.

The systematic notation of gesture and speech resulted in an inventory of phrasal sequences consisting of the foundational material for each performer's movement score, expanded and reconstructed through various performative techniques for movement, voice, and rhythm.

Specifically, Rudolf Laban's movement theory (Laban, 1988) was applied to spatial levels to amplify the range of the gestures. Further refinement involved the application of *dynamo-rhythms*, defining the qualitative aspects of bodily movements, encompassing their design, speed, and strength (Leabhart, 2007). Analogous to Laban's conceptualization of *efforts*, *dynamo-rhythms* integrate rhythmic elements with a dynamic component of force.

The emotional exploration was deepened through the integration of *Alba emoting*. The psychophysical technique, invented by the neurologist S.Bloch, utilises precise configurations of breath, posture, and facial expression to induce emotion through somatic patterns based on the six primary emotions⁵ (Deonna and Teroni, 2012).

The implication of the aforementioned techniques allowed each gesture and state to be articulated and then recontextualised, layered, and inhabited. The process transformed the initial informal material into a codified, personal language constituting the performers' physical and textual score.

⁵ Bloch's proposed basic emotions consist of joy, sadness, fear, anger, sexuality, and tenderness.

Figure 1

Redefining the Change in Democracy. Performer: Konstantina Bournia. (Photo © Maria Toultsa).

**Site-specific Applications: Space as Civic Intervention.**

The performance was organised in two parts, reflecting the bipartite character of the site: the entrance woodland and the road leading to the former execution site for political dissidents. The spatial separation between these areas, together with their different historical and social meanings, determined the structure and guided the dramaturgical choices. Such conditions informed a compositional approach that combined spoken testimony, somatic techniques, and processional movement -activating the site's public significance while articulating the performance's civic address, as follows:

In the first phase, the performers dispersed in the woodland applied a deliberately slow ambulatory process, creating an appearance of near-immobility and detachment. The slow dynamo-rhythmic tempo (Leabhart, 2007) and breath-posture patterns for tenderness (Bloch, 1994) established a steady, reduced cadence of effort. The body acted as a metronome, recalibrating the performers' internal "polyrhythms" (Lefebvre, 2013, p.25). The interoceptive focus suspended everyday awareness, inducing a liminal state - a threshold between private self and public testimony.

Aligning with the "separation phase" in *The rites of passage*, in which participants are symbolically detached from prior social and temporal orders (van Gennep, 1960, pp. 11–13) the processional movement functioned as a spatial enactment of rupture, enabling the

performers to unfold the emotional state. Spoken fragments, recollections infused with grief, but also with shared joy and care, drew memories of the dead into immediacy (Figure 1). The layering of temporalities - past affection and present absence - infused the performance with emotional complexity, transmuting personal memory into collective resonance.

The second phase of the work comprised a one-kilometre uphill procession towards a former execution site for communist resisters during World War II. Structured through a series of deliberate pauses, performers communally shared intimate, fractured narratives that addressed critical contemporary issues, concerning mental health, ageing, caregiving, and the impossibility of projecting into the future with self-care.

The physical score incorporated modulated dynamo-rhythms through tensions, brief accelerations so as to evoke states of anger, fear, and sadness. The patterned changes in body state and effort-tempo modulations were converted into compositional cues, transforming solo testimony into collective enactment. Recurring textual and gestural refrains served as affective anchors that stabilized intensity and oriented it toward urgent public address.

Figure 2

Redefining the change in democracy, Performers' final ensemble. (Photo © Vaskokri).



Adopting a socially oriented approach to site-specific practice rather than a purely geometric conception of the site, the work positioned itself in political discourse rather than as art "in" a place (Kwon, 2002). The two performative zones - the entrance woodland and the road leading to the execution site - became an agora, questioning healthcare and memory *in situ*: performers voiced testimonies on mental health and caregiving failures, asking how a democratic society can assert its values when essential care remains

inaccessible. In this context, the park became a vibrant landscape operating as a Foucauldian “heterotopia of crisis” (Foucault, 1986, p. 24), a counter-site marked by diachronic accumulation, where past traumas refracted present social crises.

Conclusions

The project *Redefining the Change of Care in Democracy* navigated the complex terrain between artistic practice and pedagogical objectives, functioning as a potent medium for articulating critical narratives of health through blended methods. A hybrid, interdisciplinary artistic methodology was necessary for the practice-based research that operated in a zone between embodied training, pedagogy, and *in situ* performance.

A central finding concerns the liminality of the performer's status, poised between learning and presenting, privacy and exposure, and process and enactment. Initially positioned as learners within a pedagogical setting, the ensemble inhabited a *backstage* register (Goffman, 1956). However, through the establishment of the interview-based protocol, the boundary between *backstage* and *frontstage* gradually dissolved. Across repeated cycles of interaction, prompting, and observation, the process instantiated “metaxis”, a dual awareness of being simultaneously inside and outside the dramatic frame (O'Toole, 1992). In this processual and contingent condition, course participants inhabited a self permanently “performing” in Goffman's sense, continuously shaped across past, present, and anticipated futures by cultural, sensory, and affective experience. The project's public presentation *re-staged* this vulnerability, enabling a reflective embodiment of lived experience without compromising performer agency. This doubled, outward and inward attentional regime, operated as a liminal threshold, mediating between testimony and composition, experience and representation, and research and performance.

Finally, the ensemble involved inhabited an intermediate *lieu* that recalibrated and organised their perception (Fischer-Lichte, 2021). In the case of *Sotiria* Hospital's park, as narratives were shared communally, the site was re-appropriated, moving beyond individual testimony, towards mutual recognition and empathetic witnessing. Performers and the public collectively entered a state of new “*communitas*” (Turner, 1969; Turner, 1982, pp. 96-97), “transitioning” (Van Gennep, 1960, p.21) to a reconstituted collective oriented towards care and memory upon re-entry. The site became a medium of outcry against the erosion of healthcare, a *space socially produced* (Lefebvre, 1991, p.26) reflecting individual pain alongside broader conditions of marginalization and societal collapse. Each step operated as a mode of lived protest against the historical amnesia of health crises and socio-political issues.

As the assembly gradually dispersed, what persisted was a calibrated tenderness, evidence that, for a time, the city had listened.

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