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Natalia Kozakiewicz

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Strategies of Creating Presence in the Space of the City - Analysing the Role of Somatic Practices in Performance Within Urban Environments

Natalia Kozakiewicz

University of Music and Dance in Cologne

Abstract

Performance located in public space seems to have a strong potential for creating a base for social bonding. Various forms of artistic activism designed for spaces that are defined as common and accessible open a possibility of experiencing a performative event collectively, and sharing the present moment on the physical and intellectual grounds. Somatic practices, which emphasise the individual body in relation to the surrounding environment, also have the potential to achieve this. How can the somatic practice of presence in the public space be cultivated? Is the collective experience of body awareness enough to make a ground for social change? Based on the collective score-making, this research on performance practice explored the topic of somatic presence in public, questioning what forms of movement performance can connect audiences and performers through a shared experience. This research, moreover, revealed a prospect of participatory performance as a form of collective presence-making and the aptitude of flow as an entry state for initiating the process of social bonding. In this article I focus on developing the somatic scoring practice as an artistic strategy for exploring body politics.

Keywords: presence, somatic, public space, score

Presence and its Embodiment

The phenomenon of presence has been extensively investigated within performance studies. Early approaches often emphasised a singular perspective, either that of the performer or of the spectator. For example, MacKendrick defines presence as the dancer's heightened attention to time and commitment to each moment (Lepecki, 2004, p.150). By contrast, Phelan characterises presence as a "living collection of embodied memories" (Lepecki, 2004, p.14). However, more recent scholarship shifts this focus towards relationality, thinking of presence not as located solely in the performer or the audience, but as emerging in the space between them. As Zarrilli (2012) argues, presence constitutes "a realm between experience, embodiment, and perception shared between the performer(s) and the audience" (p. 120), as cited in Pini (2023).

The question that follows is how this shared phenomenon of presence is embodied. Somatic practitioner and theorist Sondra Fraleigh (1991) situates presence within dance as an awareness of performed movement and a felt connection to self and world. She underscores that attention to the moment and the intentionality of movement render presence an act of full engagement and therefore, makes a performance deeply authentic. In a similar vein, social somatic practitioner and artist Petra Kupperts (2015) conceptualises the somatic field as "embodied labours of attention" (p. 508), defining presence as participation in the performance event through active reception and sensorial responsiveness.

Present Spaces and Modes of Embodied Engagement

If presence is understood in these terms — as participation, engagement, and responsiveness — it becomes necessary to ask how it can be performed within the public space. For the purpose of this study, public space is defined as urban space, which Henri Lefebvre identifies as the dominant spatial form of contemporary societies. For Lefebvre, space is never neutral but rather produced through natural and historical processes, shaped by political and ideological forces. He describes space as the dynamic interplay of three dimensions: spatial practices (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and spaces of representation (lived space) (Lefebvre, 1977, p. 341), as cited in (Zieleniec, 2018, p. 7). Within this framework, the urban space appears not only as a physical setting but also as a social construct, structuring daily life and contributing to the formation of identity and belonging.

However, urban space is marked by ambivalence. On the one hand, public and social spaces are subject to an increasing amount of regulation, monitoring, and control, which limits opportunities for the expression of values and aspirations. On the other hand, the street, with its vitality and shifting dynamics, carries potential to disrupt these systems of

order. In this sense, the urban environment may open up spaces for play, improvisation, and learning, where presence — as relational, participatory, and embodied — can be enacted against and within the structures of regulation.

This conceptual framing of presence in relation to the urban environment provides the groundwork for considering other modes of embodied engagement. In particular, the notion of flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990) and the practice of scoring (Halprin, 1969) offer valuable perspectives for examining how states of presence are facilitated, structured, and enacted in public space.

Figure 1

Part of research-documentation: participants of scoring preparing material for the session; Center of Contemporary Dance in Cologne (photo: Natalia Kozakiewicz).



Exploring the Flow of Scores

Building on this understanding of presence, the notion of flow provides a productive framework. Csíkszentmihályi (1990) defines flow as “a state in which attention is fully absorbed, self-consciousness disappears, and individuals experience a balance between the challenge of the activity and their own skills” (p. 15). This state resonates with the accounts of presence offered by Fraleigh and Koppers, who both describe a mode of complete involvement in the present moment, characterised by bodily awareness and sensorial receptivity. Whereas presence emphasises the intersubjective dimension of

performance, flow foregrounds the psychological dynamics of immersion. This raises the question of whether presence and flow can be understood as intersecting states-modes of engagement that enable performers and participants alike to enter into heightened relational and creative experience. The intersection of presence and flow thus points to the need for structures that can both guide and open embodied experience. One such structure is the score, which mediates between individual awareness, collective interaction, and spatial context.

One practice that explicitly engages with this transition between everyday perception and heightened states of presence and flow is working with scores. As Lawrence Halprin (1996) describes, scores are non-hierarchical, dynamic, and site-responsive structures that guide creative processes while leaving space for individual interpretation. They function simultaneously as constraint and invitation: providing clear frameworks while allowing for multiple variations and responses. In this sense, scores create conditions that encourage curiosity, play, and embodied experimentation, and can facilitate both individual expressivity and shared somatic experience. To investigate how scores might possibly enable enter into states of presence and flow in urban contexts, the *Scoring the Public* project was developed in Cologne, Germany.

Figures 2 and 3

Part of research-documentation: participants of the scoring-performance entering the city space, Cologne (potos: Svantje Kawecki).



Scoring the Public — Facilitating Presence in the City

In *Scoring the Public* (University of Music and Dance, Cologne) participants developed and tested movement scores in urban space. Inspired by somatic practices and contemporary dance, these tasks included exercises such as: “Take a few steps in the direction of your choice, notice the rhythm of your walking, and synchronise your steps with your breathing.” The scores were performed during site-specific audio-walks in various locations across Cologne, followed by collective reflection sessions. Analysis of impressions and reflections of scoring shared by participants revealed that the context had a strong influence on the quality of experience. In parks, participants reported a stronger interpersonal connection and greater willingness to engage with surfaces and objects. In busier city areas, the interactions between participants themselves became more pronounced. Cultural background and familiarity with public performance also show strong influence on the responses given.

Importantly, the audio-score format supported participants in maintaining somatic focus despite the distractions of the public space. The structured yet open-ended framework facilitated deeper attention to bodily perception and also strengthened group relations over the course of the sessions. Conducted between February and June 2025, the first phase of the project comprised six sessions, four with a stable group and two with open audiences. The feedback materials, collected and transcribed, indicate that the practice enhanced participants’ self-awareness, encouraged playful experimentation, and fostered greater willingness to take risks and perform collaboratively. The findings suggest that scores can bring participants into states of presence and flow while simultaneously negotiating the conditions of urban environments, as theorised by Lefebvre.

Conclusion

Taken as such, presence — theorised in performance studies as either an individual mode of attention (MacKendrick & Phelan) or a relational phenomenon as in somatic (Fraleigh & Koppers) — can be further understood in relation to both the psychological dynamics of flow and the socio-spatial conditions of urban life. Drawing on Lefebvre’s conception of space as socially produced, the urban environment emerges as both regulated and controlled and also marked by possibilities for disruption, play, and collective reimagination.

Within this context, the practice of scoring offers a productive framework for facilitating presence. As non-hierarchical structures that balance guidance with openness, scores provide transitional devices that enable participants to move between everyday perception and states of somatic awareness, engagement, and flow. The *Scoring the Public* case study demonstrated how such practices can be adapted to urban environments: participants reported heightened self-awareness, strengthened group relations, and increased

willingness to experiment, while the shifting dynamics of urban sites shaped the quality of their experiences.

The future of scoring practice thus lies not only in its capacity to foster somatic engagement but also in its potential as a performative strategy for negotiating and reconfiguring the politics of urban life. As guided improvisations that both frame and unsettle embodied experience, scores can reclaim moments of attentiveness from regulatory systems, inviting participants to imagine other ways of moving, sensing, and relating in the city. In this sense, scoring contributes to performance studies by foregrounding presence as a political as well as aesthetic act, opening pathways for further exploration of how somatic practices intervene in the lived realities of contemporary urban space.

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