

Performative Urbanism

Samson, Kristine; Juhlin, Christina Louise Zaff

Publication date:
2017

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Samson, K., & Juhlin, C. L. Z. (2017). *Performative Urbanism*. Roskilde Universitet.

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Kristine Samson & Christina Juhlin
Performance Design
Department of Communications and Arts
Roskilde University 2017

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Text and edits

Kristine Samson & Christina Juhlin
Performance Design
Department of Communications and Arts
Roskilde University 2017

With contributions from participants in Performative Urbanism Autumn 2017:

Linh Le, Lasse Oc, Peter Kjærgaard, Amalie Worre Kronborg Grevsen, Sofie Bang Kirkegaard, Anita Masková, Søren Knud Dahl Davidsen, Simone Bøgelund Rasmussen, Nils Nagel, Sophie Meldgaard, Oliver Toscano Pedersen, Ida Dalsgaard Nicolaisen, Ida Dalsgaard Nicolaisen, Sissel Fuglsang-Smidt, Mathilde Høm Kristensen, Yasmin Maria Resendorf, Astrid Faarup, Sara Mia Gøtghen Hansen, Emilie Junget.

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PERFORMATIVE URBANISM



“dance in the age of performance already expresses its singularity: to generate charged and vital problematic fields on which pressing and urgent political, corporeal, affective, and social problems are made visible and gather — not to find a solution, but to further the movement of problematization.”

André Lepecki *Singularities, Dance in the Age of Performance*, 2016, p. 8.

“The call is to stop separating the world out into meaningful representations on the one hand and ephemeral sensations on the other, and to become attentive instead to truths folded into the fabric of the world itself. This requires us to realize that we are only a part of the world, of the making of place, for the world (materialities) believes in us as much as we (emotions) believe in it.”

Dewsbury: “Witnessing Space,” 2003, p. 1908.

PERFORMATIVE URBANISM

Performative Urbanism as a transdisciplinary field

By Christina Juhlin and Kristine Samson

In the past decades, we have witnessed a tendency for art and performance practices to move out of cultural institutions and venture into the city's spaces and everyday arenas.

In covering these hybrid urban practices, the notions of “urban design” or “art in public” are no longer sufficient in understanding the performativity and agency related to these artistic or design approaches. Thus performative urbanism covers a wide range of performative approaches found in disciplines such as architecture, art, design and activism. They share an interest in the urban as a force-field of passions, a venue for encounters and places for negotiating conflicts. Thus Performative Urbanism deals with the performative agency associated with the urban environment and welcomes a broad definition of urban design: “From an understanding of design as material objects and forms placed in urban space, urban design now covers a wide range of activities, acts, performances, temporary installations, etc. These practices work in the urban realm through processes of engagement. I will gather these design practices here under the notion of “performative urban design” (Samson 2012: 292).

In this performative urbanism, art and culture unfolds as site-specific and relational works. Performative urbanism welcomes a participatory public in which not only the artist or designer but also the citizen performs as part of everyday life. The city's places and spaces are increasingly used as a scenes for cultural experiences and artistic practices. We as citizens engage in the city not only with our cognitive reason, and use the city as a functional infrastructure, we increasingly move with the city, its pulses and sensory gestures. Accordingly, our dwelling in the city can be regarded as a creative practice constantly shaped by the places and urban environments. Following from this, recent urban planning and design practices seeks to understand how we as citizen-users interact and co-create the city through our body and our senses. We witness for instance, how art, performative design and inclusive architectures appear as a tool in strategic planning where art, culture and performance become a part of development processes playing the role as “temporary spaces” or serve as tools for place-making and urban branding. However, the strategic use of performative

urbanism often takes place within the framework of a representational logic and within safe disciplinary zones where the performativity of the urban environment itself is underestimated. Performative urbanism suggest an affirmative approach in which the strategic and planned design discourses are replaced by performative, inclusive architectures. Here art as explorative processes can play an important role in enabling sensory, social and cultural encounters.

We see a potential in how art, performative designs and inclusive architectures hold the capacity both to comment on, and to intervene in the strategic urban planning. As noted by Lepecki, arts potential lies not only in its capacity to perform, but rather to install singularities that *do not perform* within the governing mode of neo-liberal, spatial production (Lepecki 2016).

Performative design, art and inclusive architectures propose alternatives to existing commercial or functional spaces or invite citizen-users into participatory processes. Also performative design, art and inclusive architectures share a capacity to negotiate the social and cultural dramas by offering non-linear processes without specific ends.



Despite this double role of performative art, architecture and design, the hybridity and trans-disciplinary breakdown of existing disciplinary barriers stands clear. It is this trans-disciplinary field we gather under the framework, performative urbanism. This disciplinary exchange can also be seen in relation to the city as a force-field of passion, as noted by Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift in their book, *Cities* from 2002. The book was in many ways the starting point for later non-representational approaches to the city – approaches that in the ontology share similarities with the bodily and sensory agencies formulated in performance theory.

The city as a force-field of passions invites us to regard the city as a processual, affective and non-representational phenomenon. Furthermore, it breaks with the idea of urban space as a container for human action or a sign-system encoded with semantic meaning. Rather the city and its urban environments, constantly initiate processes and events, in which the social, the material, the technological and sensorial emerge in new formations.

In this regard, to make urban design, culture and events in performative urbanism implies new processual and non-representational methods for investigations, and it calls for site-specific and situational modes of researching, presenting and performing.

Performative urbanism as non-representational and arts-based research

In the transdisciplinary field of performative urbanism, social sciences invent new methodologies that can grasp the processual, affective and ephemeral. Social sciences are therefore looking towards arts based research (see for instance Manning 2016, Back and Puwar 2012, in which performances and live art works serve as the point of departure for witnessing the non-discursive and non-representational processes in the city. The point is not to make art out of research, but to let the poetic and generative expressions in art give research a “sense of wonder” in contrast to analytical and discursive knowledge and the need to understand and explain.

Furthermore, if the city is “a place of mobility, flow and everyday practices” as it is understood in Amin and Thrift work on *Cities* (Amin og Thrift 2002: 7), the modes of doing qualitative research must themselves be situated within these every day practices and involve the body, the senses, and in extension to the them, technologies and media.

The body has the capacity to affect and to be affected by the urban environment, which can be increased or diminished though technologies and media. Bodily, sensory and mediated capacities to affect and to be affected open the urban environment towards “shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions” (Lorimer i Vannini 2015: 5). Thus, non-representational methodologies can open the city and its governing meanings, signs and symbols up towards a plethora of flows,

expressions and practices that current urban planning and social science research approaches overlook or regard as inferior. In this sense, the non-representational turn in social science and cultural geography has the potential to transgress, or at least transform, existing borders of knowledge, to engage our attention with enactments and actualizations of spaces, rather than reproduce existing modes of spatial production. As formulated by Anderson and Harrison,

“Non-representationalists are much less interested in representing an empirical reality that has taken place before the act of representation than they are in enacting multiple and diverse potentials of what knowledge can become afterwards. It is no longer depiction, reporting, or representation that frustrates you. Rather, it is enactment, rupture, and actualization that engage your attention” (Anderson and Harrison 2010).

Challenging mental geographies – Performative Urbanism

The aim of the course, Performative Urbanism, was to experiment with the various force field of passions in the city. It seeks to develop alternative and non-linear methods and formats that welcomes the processual and every day practices, and draws attention to the micro-perceptual and non-representational processes in the city.

The theme of performative urbanism in the autumn 2017 was “boundaries”. Through theory, workshops and interventions, the course explored and experimented with urban boundaries. Boundaries can be understood in various senses. The architect and performance studies scholar, Dorita Hannah reflects on the spatial performativity of the built and designed environment. In her recent text, *Constructing Barricades and Creating Borderline Events*, she reflects upon how the built environment shapes our culture and dispositions to act and live,

“Through such spatial performativity, the built environment reinforces a contemporary barricade mentality, curtailing our freedom of movement and expression in the very name of ‘freedom’. And yet the borderline – more than a simple dividing line between us/here and them/there – thickens into a complex geographical and metaphysical terrain that inhabits us just as we inhabit it. (Hannah, 2015).

As the quotation illustrates, borderlines are not exclusively tied to the built environment. Borderlines are mental geographies that inhabit us in our everyday actions, our choices of taste, and in our consumption of culture and places. In this sense, physical borderlines can be said to be reproduced in a normative borderline mentality. Boundaries as a theme also refer to the breaking of disciplinary boundaries, and more generally the blurring of boundaries between art and research - a blurry of disciplinary boundaries which can be identified in social sciences and humanities and in which performance and live methods play an important role (see for instance Sheller, 2015, Leavy 2009).

From a non-representational perspective, for instance, boundaries between humans and things must be overcome to see the processes involved in all sorts of becoming; processes which are far from controlled by humans alone but seeks to understand the agency of materials, and other non-human actors such as mobile devices, sounds, nature and animals in the city.

The course Performative Urbanism is therefore an investigation into how performance design can give shape to a non-representational take on the city, and how various research explorations perform both as research creation and as a contribution to the field it wishes to explore. Working not so much with performative urban design as disruptive, but rather with the potentials of performative explorations and experiments with urban boundaries, the course Performative Urbanism proposed two formats: Workshops and performative interventions of the students.

The workshops

"Nothing is a mistake. There's no win and no fail, there's only make"

- free interpretation of John Cage: rules for teachers and students

Taking cultural, social and mental geographies into consideration, the course Performative Urbanism proposed three workshops which experimented with the mental geographies of existing urban borderlines. The aim of the Performative Urbanism workshops was a thinking in action taking the urban force-field of passions as its point of departure. It was a wish not to design spaces and experiences anew but to co-create with the found pulses, atmospheres and rhythms of the city.

First of all, the workshop was developed as a collaboration between artists and researchers, students and teachers. The idea was to cross the boundaries between professions, art and research and normative hierarchies between teacher and students. To initiate the workshops, and show rather than tell the themes of the three workshops, we re-enacted a visual performance originally performed by Belgian Mexican artist Francis Alÿs in a pedestrian crossing close to Nørrebro Station.

Sometimes doing something leads to nothing – a re-enactment

By Linh Le, Lasse Oc, Peter Kjærsgaard, Christina Juhlin, Kristine Samson

The performance was both a re-enactment of Francis Alÿs's process work, *Sometimes doing something leads to nothing*, and at the same time an enactment of the themes of the workshops, 1) Things and materiality, 2) body and movement 3) the social and cultural.

The re-enactment took place in the pedestrian crossing at Nørrebro St., where Lygten, Nordre Fasanvej, Frederikssundsvej and Nørrebrogade intersect. The crossing formed the physical scene of our movements and actions. The fourth wall of the stage (traditionally the wall between the audience and the performance) was

broken down and the audience was integrated on stage by the passers-by and everyday commuters. Dewsbury notes the importance of witnessing and how such and act, or call makes place in the world... this is about attending to differences – those imperceptible, sometimes minor, and yet gathering, differences that script the world in academically less familiar but in no less real ways.” Dewsbury 2003.

From the perspective of the performers, this was a witnessing of every day urban life with a particular interest in the normally imperceptible rhythms, materialities and social habitation of space. Through the performance we discovered the tactility of surfaces, the normativity of speed and rest, the social habitation of the pedestrian crossing as a non-verbal space with limited space for encounters, but with plenty of bodily interactions, we found ephemeral aesthetic beauty in the reflection of the ice and the autumn sky, and in the rhythmic persistency of the sound scape of the pedestrian crossing.





Through scores informed by the 20th century avant-garde movements, the workshop participants were asked to search for borders in the urban environment. They had to dig into the border and its constituent parts, by for instance, digging into what was beneath it. Finally, they had to negotiate the border by building a bridge to overcome it. The scores were enacted individually, and after the workshop, participants noted how it was not only an investigation of borders and barricades in the physical environment, it was also a exploration of what limitations you set up for yourself, when moving and dwelling in the city. Thus, it was a mental process of defining and framing borders that involved a mental and perhaps even existential mapping of urban mental geographies.

The next workshop was about movement and the body and was conducted by dance performer Linh Le. Informed by the avant-garde dancer and choreographer, Robert Dunn, Linh introduced a movement vocabulary, consisting of “all the ways we know how to put together and take apart movement.” The movement vocabulary was developed through six every day movements, that was serially altered taking one movement at the time. Though the process, the workshop participants discovered how every day movements could be altered, and how other ways of being together in urban space emerged. The workshop was collaborative and people were not only encountering new bodily ways of inhabiting urban space, they were also encountering ways of interacting with each other as moving bodies with a plethora of capacities to act, communicate, move and rest.







Finally, the last workshop dealt with the social, cultural and habitual life in the everyday city. The workshop was conducted by Lasse Oc and Peter Kærsgaard who form the art collaborative Jam Boy – a research based art collaborative working within visual art and participatory art and planning. In the workshop participants should search for culturally and socially places and spaces that were unfamiliar to them, venture into them and look for openings for the next visit. Among the spaces found in the workshop was a Chinese gift shop, an Islamic boarding school, multifunctional corner shops serving as local post offices, a car dealer, a workout gym, and the DIY market, Silvan.

What was found in the places was in most cases open invitations to participate in the cultural practices associated with the environment.

Performative interventions

Informed of the themes of the workshops, the students developed their own performative urban interventions. True to the situated live methodologies proposed by non-representational theory, the performative designs and interventions were presented on site on the day of the exam in a site specific live exhibition. The live-exhibition was a situated format inviting the workshop participant to produce and perform enactments of urban spaces rather than representations. Opening the city for cracks, queer encounters and interstitial spaces.



On Hold

By Emilie Junget, Jonathan Bunch, Søren Dahl Davidsen & Simone Bøgelund

In spaces of transit, like Nørrebro Station, particular social norms and unwritten rules are played out. People who temporarily stay in such spaces are on hold. *On Hold* explores the norms and daily practices which are performed during waiting time. By observing people at Nørrebro Station, we found that people are enclosed by their own world and often spend time on their smartphones.

Through an audio installation at Nørrebro Station, *On Hold* draws attention to the actions and behavior of the waiting people by sonically stressing the already existing norms and practices which are unconsciously performed. We use sound as medium because of its penetrating and immersive qualities. A visual medium would be much easier to ignore or miss, since people are so visually engaged already (through their phones and the surrounding buildings and nature). Furthermore, when waiting at places like train stations, we are already aware of the sound system, since every announcement will be communicated through here.

On Hold consists of interior monologues that seek to exaggerate and call attention to the waiting situation and its practices. The monologues are inspired by our own experiences of waiting at Nørrebro Station and reveal transient and sudden thoughts, daydreaming and deeper reflections.





The Emergence of a Collective Body

By Astrid Faarup, Ida Dalsgaard Nicolaisen, Karoline Ry, Mathilde Hoem Kristensen, Nils Nagel and Sofie Bang Kirkegaard.

Nørrebro Station at rush hour. People are moving in habitual patterns. They are individuals coincidentally situated at the same place and time. For a short while their patterns meet with one goal in common: moving from A to B. Suddenly a sculptural body of bodies emerges apparently out of nowhere. They are individuals with different agendas and bodily impulses, while moving in unity. The collective body creates boundaries in ways that challenge your habitual movements and provoke you to rethink your path through the station.

Inspired by Willi Dorner's site specific performance *Bodies in Urban Space* (2011) and Alexandra Pirici's performance *Threshold* (2017), *The Emergence of the Collective Body* exhibits the arbitrary way in which individuals move through and inhabit urban spaces. The mediality of the audiovisual piece is inspired by the Austrian documentarist Ulrich Seidl's *Paradies: Liebe* (2012). The framing is primarily static functioning as a magnifying glass through which we focus. The content reminds one of the French filmmaker Jacques Tati and his iconic *Play Time* (1967). In this film modernist architecture is questioned and the main character is constantly wondering how to approach the space around him. The same applies to the way in which the collective body emerges and examines Nørrebro Station in new and curious ways.

The performance can be understood in many different ways: is this an image of the difference between the way individuals and groups move? Is this just plain absurdity? How do you approach the spaces that you usually walk through thoughtlessly when something (someone) is blocking your way? *The Emergence of the Collective Body* questions the power relations between individual and group movements in urban spaces. When the performers meet, new relations emerge and challenge existing norms.





They are individuals with different agendas and bodily impulses, while moving in unity.



A Real Danish Family – at Føtex

By Anita Mašková, Rikke Kjærsgaard, Sophie Meldgaard and Sara Gøtghen.

On October 13th this year *A Real Danish Family*, a sculpture by Gillian Wearing, was revealed in front of Statens Museum for Kunst (SMK). The sculpture portrays a Danish family consisting of a mother, a father and a toddler - a rare image in the context of bronze sculptures which usually depict kings or generals on horseback. The title of the sculpture has caused debates and discussions about what it means to be a real Danish family and generally what it means to be a family. Since its location at SMK is temporary and its future location has not yet been announced, we have developed a suggestion for the sculpture's future location in Copenhagen city. Our ambition was to stay loyal to the debating aspects of the sculpture, as well as the investigation of being a family and the challenge within its own media. Nørrebro is, compared to SMK, a place where one meets various family compositions and cultural and social differences. It is a place where one's perception on family and being Danish is in constant negotiation, which is why we suggest the sculpture should be placed here.

To make an even stronger connection with the location we have asked ourselves the question: can one describe family through places? What places characterize family? With these questions in mind we wanted to investigate if we, by a locational description of family could identify a common pattern. Therefore, the final choice fell upon the supermarket Føtex, located by the crossroads between Nørrebrogade and Lygten, in Copenhagen city. We see this supermarket as an inevitable joint for most Danish families. This is where the preparations for family dinner and lunch packs take their beginning; it is a place where you buy domestic articles for housekeeping.

The area surrounding Føtex is a chaotic, multicultural scene, a hub where metro construction, Nørreport station, cars, bikes and bus stops intertwine. Several people use and move through the space; therefore, placed here, the sculpture would be able to initiate debates and discussions about family and affiliation outside SMK's relation.

As a part of our investigation of the locations relation to family, we photographed a few different families entering, or leaving the space in front of Føtex, on the spot where we would place "A Real Danish Family".

The intervention is therefore an investigation of the a potential place, and a documentation of the process, as well as a polyphonic embodiment and nuanced understanding of the sculpture on the location we proposed for the statue.



Mirror Walk

By Amalie W. K. Grevsen, Oliver Toscano Pedersen, Sissel Fuglsang-Smidt and Yasmin Resendorf

With performance design as a critical analytical tool that can renegotiate the participants' view of the city and its materiality, the Mirror Walk aims at doing exactly that through a performative presentation of the street Stefansgade in Copenhagen.

The mirror shows the city from a new angle because it allows the spectator to see what is behind or above him/her by reflecting the opposite of where the eye is looking. By shining light upon areas or things where we wouldn't normally look we enable these areas or things to show up and take on significance. This can change how and what the participants view and associate with these areas both in the present and in the future. In other words the Mirror Walk opens up for an aesthetic experience of the city by engaging the participants.





Performative perspectives

Across the different formats – audio installation, performance, photo story and guided walk – the enactments of urban space all created situations of increased awareness through more or less explicit displacements of everyday experiences.

The first two works – *On hold* and *The Emergence of a Collective Body* – took place at a train station and approached the everyday situations of waiting and moving. While the first work created an immersive experience by externalizing the inner monologue of waiting passengers, the second work gave all of these waiting passengers something to do while waiting! From inner monologues that became temporarily public and shared, to the strange figure of the moving collective body, the enactments worked with the site-specificity linked to the public state of waiting and moving.

The third enactment – *A Real Danish Family* – took us to another everyday place, the supermarket, and performed a processual story through photos which were mounted and dismantled in front of the viewers, much in the same way as the collective body was formed out of nowhere and then suddenly disappeared into a train. But this time, we as viewers were asked to take part in the arrangement of the photos, which resulted in a temporary exhibition of the plurality of social formations that gather in the supermarket, with its strange and material connections to practises of the home.

In the same area and everyday space, but now invited to take a *Mirror Walk*, the audience rediscovered a familiar street by seeing it with, rather than through, mirrors. With mobile as well as pre-installed mirrors, the last enactment of urban space was a redirecting and a focalization of the gaze. The mirrors aestheticized an everyday urban experience, but they did more than that: They sharpened a material awareness of everything reflective – puddles, windows, screens – and by drawing attention to these seemingly hidden material qualities, pointed towards the manifold layers of urban experience.

Performance design as interstitial space

As illustrated in the five performance interventions, performance design is capable of negotiating existing borderlines – both the borderline mentalities in social and cultural norms of the city, and the borderlines between for instance the work of art, and how it can be integration in every day publics, and also the borderlines between nature and culture in the city that can negotiated through performance. The borders between people while waiting at the trans train station. Also, the performance interventions illustrated other non-representational ways to engage with, and research the urban environment, approaches that are not solely directed to discursive and critical investigations, but research that welcomes processual, material, bodily and collective and creative experimentation.

Or, as formulated by performance design scholar, Dorita Hannah:

“As an interdisciplinary and collaborative field, performance design negotiates cutting-edge contemporary practices that cross boundaries and often fall ‘between’ theatre and other performing, spatial and visual art forms. Emerging as an interstitial space for extending scenography’s influence in the new century, it operates as an open field of border encounters, avoiding terms such as ‘scenery’, ‘costumes’ and ‘lighting’ in order to focus on how objects, environments, garments, bodies and the intangible elements of sound, light and media perform. that is, how they are all active agents within the performance event.”

Hannah 2016, p. 128.

The workshops and performative urban interventions should be seen as a series of design proposals for how a non-representational methodology can unfold in practice and not just as an analytical framework in theory. To enact new ways of doing and designing the the urban can very well be said to be the role of a performance design in an increasingly performative urbanism.

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