

Performance as a Protest: the disruption of the everyday through performance in public spaces

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Introduction

Alarm rings... make breakfast... get ready for the day... take the tube... walk to work... work... walk back to the tube station... get home... make dinner... shower... brush teeth... go to bed—repeat over and over and over again.

Today, many people enter into a very scheduled and set everyday routine. Sometimes it is because people enjoy a sense of simplicity and organisation, but other times people just naturally fall into a cycle without even realising it. Habits and routines are great as they provide much more flow and ease in our everyday lives. However, this ease is a slippery slope towards passivity, blindness, and ignorance.

Habits or routines are repeated behaviours performed regularly. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman defines a routine as ‘the pre-established pattern of action which is unfolded during a performance and which may be presented or played through on other occasions’ (1959, p. 27). Anyone who has ever set a routine can verify that the more the routine is performed the easier it becomes. It is almost like the brain decides to shut off and the muscle memory of the body takes over. Routines leave the individual with a sense of freedom and ease, but it leaves the human population in a more detrimental space than we realise. We begin to run in a mechanical and automated way.

As humans, we are intelligent beings, and it is important for us to utilise this skill to continue to find advancements and growth in order to improve and better our world. The developments and advancements humans have created from the beginning of time to the present are to say the least, magnificent! If as a society, we continue to undergo this shut down of our brains, then we are potentially hindering our potential for even more advancements in the future. We have so much to offer as intelligent beings, yet today passivity seems to be encompassing society.

To this day, individuals are constantly shocked and surprised to find out a shooting happened, someone got pick-pocketed, someone on a motorcycle stole a phone, someone got hit by a car, and so on. This is no surprise. The lack of awareness people have today explains why these types of events continue to occur. People are not aware of their everyday lives. As Stephen Johnstone mentioned in his *The Everyday*, the everyday is 'the trivial and unseen, the passive and the boring, and the repetitive non-events that characterise the mundane' (2008, p. 62). As individuals undergo the mundane everydayness, they allow their brains to shut off and in doing so reject any sort of awareness. Individuals don't see people. They don't see what is right in front of their eyes. They don't see the details of the same walked path. Individuals simply don't see.

George Perec (1973) articulately states the issue of everydayness in his *The Infra-Ordinary*:

To question the habitual. But that's just it, we're habituated to it. We don't question it, it doesn't question us, it doesn't seem to pose a problem, we live it without thinking, as if it carried within it neither question nor answers, as if it weren't the bearer of any information. This is no longer even conditioning, it's anaesthesia. We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep. But where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space? (para. 6)

With Perec's thoughts in mind, I pose the following questions: How can we prevent passivity in our society? How can we maintain active thought processes and awareness? Can performance jolt us out of passivity? Is performance merely an awareness in everydayness we don't pay attention to?

The issue of passivity is something that needs to be confronted. Society needs to be woken up. Society needs to obtain a reengagement with their mind. Society needs something to jolt them out of this sleep-walking state that will reengage their curiosity and their minds.

Stephen Johnstone (2008) discusses what it is to notice:

Noticing is poetic because it involves selflessly attending to the ordinary reality of others, a process that enlarges vision, stretches the imagination, and elicits judgments (p. 64).

Noticing is an active way of seeing. Seeing is a way of being present. Being present is a way of being aware. Re-engaging individuals with the mundane and everyday will allow these individuals to notice, see, and be aware.

Previous artists have utilised and continue to utilise site-specific performances to reengage individuals. In Richard Schechner's *The Future of Ritual* (1993), he defines performance as 'behaviour heightened, if ever so slightly and publicly displayed; twice-behaved behaviour' (p. 1). With this definition one can recognise how essentially behaviour relative to everydayness is a form of performance with a lack of awareness. Furthermore, in Victoria Hunters' *Moving Sites* (2015), site-specific dance is defined as 'dance performance created and performed in response to a specific site or location' (p. 1). Dance performances brought to public spaces can disrupt the flow of a particular place and engage individuals—especially within a metropolitan city. In Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1998), she defines public space as 'everything that appears in public that can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity' (p. 50). To place something or someone in a place where it usually doesn't belong is a way to disrupt the flow of a place and catch individuals' off-guard. Performances in public spaces can be used to jolt individuals and activate their minds, if only for a few seconds. In response to the issue of passivity, I will be exploring the research question: How do unannounced site-specific performances effect twice-behaved behaviour of everyday life?

I will be exploring how unannounced site-specific performances can be used to disrupt twice-behaved behaviour of everyday life in a metropolitan city. I will be referencing Judith Butler, Richard Schechner, Stephen Johnstone, George Perec, Hannah Arendt, Baz Kershaw, and Erving Goffman to support my stance. I will delve further into the concepts of public spaces, deterritorialisation, and revelatory experience to further answer my research question. Additionally, I will demonstrate how essentially performances in public spaces can be viewed as a protest—a protest to passivity.

Performances and the Public

Performances occurring in a public space draws attention to what actually defines public, how bodies that usually are not in this public space can disrupt it, how these public performances can be viewed as cultural interventions, and how these bodies can now be termed political. It is through placing bodies or things out of context that these questions

arise and come to surface the individual(s). Unannounced performances draw attention and spark a number of questions for viewers, spectators, or passerby's.

Public spaces in metropolitan cities such as train stations, parks, public squares, plazas, etc. are swarming with individuals exposed in the public. Ardent (1998) suggests 'that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality' (p. 50). Arendt's definition of the public sphere essentially implies that visibility—both visually and audibly—in a public space is public and real. That being said, anything or anyone that places themselves in a public space—where any individual is allowed to congregate or be on/by/near—is in essence public or appears to be public. This public appearance is a means of producing a consensual reality, but this reality can be questioned and de-realised.

Due to the nature that all bodies in public spaces can be seen and heard, we can draw upon Goffman's definition of interaction which states:

Interaction (that is, face-to-face interaction) may be roughly defined as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence. An interaction may be defined as all the interaction which occurs throughout any one occasion when a given set of individuals are in one another's continuous presence (1959, p. 26).

When individuals are entering into a public sphere, naturally they already are interacting with others whether intentionally or not. Their physical bodies in relation to other physical bodies creates an unavoidable interaction. When a site-specific performance is integrated into these everyday interactions, then a breaking of frame occurs and a disruption unfolds.

Amidst the public space, the interactions occurring are subject to disruptions created by the interacting human body(ies). As Goffman elaborates on in his *Frame Analysis*:

The human body is one of those things that can disrupt the organisation of activity and break the frame, as when an individual appears in clothes that are unbuttoned or unsuitable or a guest slips on a rug or a child knocks over a vase (1974, p. 347).

The presence of these unannounced performative bodies breaks the frame of the individuals engaged with the mundane and everyday routines of their lives. The individual(s) becomes disrupted when this human body appears in an unusual

circumstance and the individual(s) recognises the series of events unfolding in relation to the performance taking place. Hence, an exchange of interactions is initiated by the human body which disrupts the everydayness of individuals in the public space.

Interactions are continuously occurring during a performance in a public space. The individuals and the performers are in constant negotiation of the space. The performer is in constant engagement with the viewer's to not only get their attention or interest, but to also continuously be aware of their space and surroundings. Alternatively, the viewer becomes disrupted and breaks the frame, noticing the out-of-place performance, he or she continues to engage in the performance, or continues to manoeuvre her or his way around the performers. The immediate presence of both the viewers and performers creates an exchange and negotiation of space, emotion, and choices; ultimately, creating an active interaction between both parties in the public space. The interactions and disruptions occurring within the public space enters a sphere of politics.

Baz Kershaw underscores the political potential of disruption in everyday interactions through performance and the breaking of frameworks. Kershaw labels this as a 'cultural intervention' (1992, p. 6). When the artist takes their work into the streets and disrupts the mundane, passive routines of individuals, it is a cultural intervention. It is an opportunity for the community to recognise how our current culture has become passive and complacent; How technological advancements and the fast-paced nature of our society has allowed us to lose our sense of curiosity in the everyday. No longer do we pay attention to details, recognise the faces we pass, recognise the architecture, recognise the familiarity. We have habituated ourselves to completely shut off our brains and in doing so we have developed a community that lacks awareness and engagement. Performances brought to public spaces serve as a cultural intervention for communities to wake up again and begin to notice what is right in front of them.

The cultural intervention occurring through the site-specific performance also is intrinsically political. Butler argues that politics only takes place when the body appears (2011, para. 5). She states:

For politics to take place, the body must appear. I appear to others, and they appear to me, which means that some space between us allows each to appear...who we are, bodily, is already a way of being 'for' the other, appearing in ways that we cannot see,

being a body for another in a way that I cannot be for myself, and so dispossessed, perspectively, your very sociality (Butler, 2011, para. 6).

Placing the performative bodies in the public space is a protest. All site-specific performances are disruptive. Therefore, site-specific performances could be considered political. And therefore, site-specific performances could be considered a protest. Site-specific performances are not only a protest presented by the performers but each performing body is representative of the thousands of bodies who support the core beliefs instilled into the performance occurring. Drawing back on Butler's previous quote: 'who we are, bodily, is already a way of being 'for' the other' (2011, para. 6).

Performances in public spaces redefine and re-conceptualise many ideas for individuals. What is termed public remains a question, the audience involvement becomes more present, cultural interventions occur, and the performance can be claimed to be political and a protest. These ideas all arise out of merely relocating a performance. It is interesting to recognise how many questions and facts can surface from just relocation. Hence, this is precisely why placing performances in public spaces have the ability to disrupt individuals, viewers, and passerby's from their everyday, mundane routines.

Disruptions and Deterritorialization

Disruptions can be as nonchalant as a hiccup in a sentence or as vibrant as masses of bodies in the centre of a city protesting. Disruptions occurring can disrupt people, places, or events from happening. A disruption usually prevents the normative and everyday from occurring as it would usually. The spectrum of disruptions is a very coloured one and is very much dependent on the individual and the location. To disrupt a place/ location, event, or action(s) is to disrupt the normative or expected routine of the individual engaging in that space. To disrupt the normative (and/or expected) routine of the individual is to disrupt the mundane, habitual, and passive thought processes of that individual. To disrupt passive thought processes of an individual is to engage active thought processes. Thus, to disrupt a place, event, or action(s) is to engage active thought processes in an individual encountering that space.

Location, people, and disruptions can also be used to interrupt the space where these three things are interacting and encountering each other. Miwon Kwon discusses how site-specific work has the potential to 'invoke a liberating deterritorialization'(2004, p.

165). By this he means, the location becomes disrupted through the performance occurring, which may create a number of outcomes and realised interpretations. Disruptions of locations equate to the disruptions of the bodies in the space. Hence, any individual in a location at a certain time when an unannounced performance occurs has no choice but to engage with this sense of disruption. Additionally, not only is the space being disrupted, but it is also being reconfigured by the bodies in the space (Butler, 2011, para. 1). Butler explains how bodies in public spaces actually ‘find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action, and they themselves act when they become the support for action’ (2011, para. 1). The location contributes as much to the site-specific work as do the actual performing bodies. The location is acting just as much as the performing bodies are acting. The performing bodies would not be as significant or noticed without the material environment in the public setting supporting the human action occurring (Butler, 2011, para. 1). By placing performances in public spaces, bodies are able to seize the space and lay claim to the significance of their presence. While doing so, the location becomes disrupted and reconfigured during performances in public spaces and continues to affect the additional bodies not physically involved in the performance occurring.

The disruption and reconfiguration of location impacts the individual’s in or near the space during the actions occurring. Dance writer Camille Lefevre argues that site-specific performance is used to ‘de-familiarise’ an environment by ‘disordering the rhythm of the everyday’ (Walthall, 2015, p. 226). Drawing upon this argument, it can be noticed that once you become disrupted by the everyday, the location where the disruption occurs suddenly becomes more peculiar or interesting—no longer is this particular location another element to your everyday routine. Victoria Hunter describes this shift in perception of a location:

This temporary act of transformation challenges perceptions of familiar places by moving them ‘forwards’ into direct consciousness as sites of play, engagement and interaction as opposed to ‘background’ facades or statutory components of a common cityscape or rural scenery which we pass by or move through en route to somewhere else (2015, p. 1).

A new sense of engagement washes over the individual(s) who encounters the performance occurring. Additionally, the acting performance and location not only creates a shift of perception, but also creates a shift from the passive to the active as the individual

now has to make decisions amidst the unfolding performance. This can cause a more superficial disruption for the individual, but nonetheless creates a clear disruption from passivity as the individual proceeds to engage and find an alternative route.

Deterritorialization can occur when utilising site-specific artwork or performance as well. Richard Serra is a primary example of someone who created a sense of deterritorialization with his site-specific sculpture, *Titled Arc* (1981). Serra's *Titled Arc* was a massive curved steel wall (measuring 12 ft tall and 120 ft long) that dissected the plaza of the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building in Manhattan (Lebourdais, 2016, para. 8). You can only imagine the frustration of the people who were used to cutting through this plaza to get where they needed to go. Serra's intent was to create a problem for people hoping to cut through the plaza—they now had to walk around the entire plaza and in doing so obtained different perspectives of this massive steel wall and the plaza. Serra argued, 'step by step, the perception not only of the sculpture but of the entire environment changes' (Lebourdais, 2016, para. 9). This sculpture is very symbolic and representative of how deterritorialization can occur through the use of art or performance. Serra disrupted the location and caused individuals to obtain new perspectives and meanings of the space they were encountering everyday with respects to both the sculpture and location.

Deterritorialization creates a disruption that allows the individual(s) to question the location they are in. It allows the individual(s) to recognise the everyday, the public spaces they are always seeing, the mundane spaces that seem to not astonish the individual anymore. As Perec's work elaborates on the everyday:

What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us (1973, para. 10).

A site-specific performance disrupts the everyday rhythm of the individual(s) which leaves room for the individual to re-notice the location or space they are in while they encounter a disruption. If the performance does not engage them, at least individuals are able to either re-engage with the location or to re-engage with their own mind and thought processes.

Deterritorialization often occurs in a site-specific work whether intended to or not. Rosemary Lee and Simon Whitehead created a durational performance, *Calling Tree*, which took place in George's Gardens in Bloomsbury. This performance was centred around a massive tree in the park and had performances using movement and voice high

up in the trees. The performance created a sense of deterritorialization as the park now became disrupted with the performance and a new identity of the location was being created hand-in-hand with the performance. It caused the audience to look up and notice what was occurring while simultaneously admiring the beauty of these massive trees in the park. Often when you are walking through this park you never really look up and recognise how enormous these trees are, rather the gaze or focus is habitually downwards or forwards, not upwards. It created a beautiful opportunity for viewers to deeply appreciate and recognise this park in the centre of London from a new perspective—an upwards perspective. Lee and Whitehead stated that this performance was 'designed to encourage us to look upwards, to consider our position on the Earth, *Calling Tree* is a gently yet powerful act of reclamation and activism' (Arts Admin, no date). The intent of their work was much larger than just reconfiguring the location, yet the work had the power to simply adjust the perspective of a location, which ultimately extended beyond just the perspective of a location and into the perspective of our own thoughts and beliefs.

Revelatory Experiences and Identity

Site-specific performance not only disrupts passive thought processes, but it also has the potential to create revelatory experiences for spectators. Hunter introduces the term revelatory experience in her *Moving Sites* (2015, p. 1). Hunter describes revelatory experience as 'one that reveals to the experiencer not only something of the site in which it is housed but also exposes their own processes of being-in-the-world' (2015, p. 1). There is potential for the spectator to not only engage with the location and the performance, but also their own existence in the world. Utilising public spaces as performative locations creates opportunities for more members of the community to engage with this type of work and undergo a revelatory experience.

Amidst a revelatory experience something deeper is revealed about the city when the individual realises something about the site and something about their own presence in the world. The concept of the city is no longer its own identity, the concept of the city becomes intertwined with the individual(s) identity and the two identities begin to coexist and influence each other. As mentioned in *Moving Sites*:

The concept of an urban landscape is not just the buildings and infrastructure that compose the city, but the belief systems we invest in it, our evocations of its

energies, its flows, its patterns, its life forces, its stories, sedimented histories and invisible subterranean fluids (Brown, 2015, p. 200).

Once we begin to realise how the identity of the self and identity of the metropolitan city are equally influential to the other, and because of this both are in constant flux, then we can realise the value in presence and acknowledgement of the everyday. As Perec stated, '...question what seems so much a matter of course that we've forgotten its origins' (1973, para. 9).

While site-specific performances are occurring and frames are breaking, disruptions are occurring, and interactions are being negotiated; a deeper opportunity arises for the individual. The opportunity for the individual to realise, question, or re-conceptualise their identity. The mundane and everydayness suddenly is not only interrupted but it is questioned and enters a self-reflective and globally reflective space. If the individual chooses to seize the moment of this performative disruption, then they can potentially engulf themselves in deep reflection. And if they are lucky enough, maybe this matter of mundaneness and everydayness can be re-discovered and enter a new world of curiosities as the individual re-establishes their position in the world and their current space. Maybe this individual breaks their own egocentric frame and begins to realise the overlapping frames of themselves and the city they are residing in. Together these identities coexist and influence the other. Maybe now this individual can go on through their mundane everyday life and see. Really see. The buildings. The cities. The bricks. The cracked pavements. The faces of all the people coexisting together.

Conclusion

In conclusion, unannounced site-specific performance can be utilised to disrupt the everyday of individuals residing in metropolitan cities. Essentially, bringing performance to public spaces is a protest. It is a protest to passivity, a protest to frameworks, a protest to normality, and a protest to perspective. Performance can be used to awaken individuals from a sleep walking automated routine—if only for a moment. With the increase in technology and social media platforms, it is crucial that we begin to recognise the significance in being aware and engaged. We must not let passivity and technology consume us.

Site-specific performances are intended to serve more audiences and more members of the community. Individuals who may usually not attend art-related events will become exposed to this type of work and potentially influenced. As artists, we have a responsibility to express what cannot be said and to suggest new perspectives. If we are only sharing our works within art community settings then these ideas begin to enter a loop and no longer is their significance as influential. To be able to present art works in the public gives the larger community more opportunities to become engaged with their everyday, to gain new perspectives, to recognise their everyday, and to question anything or everything. By using site-specific performances, we can begin to re-awaken and re-engage individuals with the brilliance that surrounds us.

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