

Performative Art in Urban City Centres

Navigating the terrain of art making and value systems in public space

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Abstract

This paper outlines, from an artist/practitioner's perspective, the terrain in which to balance artistic autonomy and how to make a difference when creating performative art in urban city centres.

The autonomy of art and its capacity to influence political discussions is an ambiguous notion. Art is considered a "free zone" for critique, but discussions seldom reach outside the art context. The artist has to balance the commercialisation of all performative expressions in public space, the cultural and economic capital, and the artistic processes as tools for art making, urban development, and research.

The issues are examined in a Swedish context and *Let's meet in Göteborg*, a site-specific audiowalk I created in 2014, is used to bounce off questions and dilemmas of how artistic "knowledge production" about urban locations can be shared and contribute to society at large.

Keywords: Public space, performative art, value-systems, artistic research, urban development

Introduction

This paper will focus on site-specific performative art in gentrified urban city centers, from an artist/practitioner's perspective, and with the aim to outline parts of the terrain in which it navigates. I will outline dilemmas, questions and choices for how to situate and re-situate artistic practice in public space, in the context of art making, value-systems, and research. In order to consider the issues raised on a more particular level, my work *Let's meet in Göteborg*, will be used. I hold that performative art in public space cannot be seen in isolation from the society in which it operates. Consequently, it will be argued that changes in society do affect performative art as well as value systems related to it. However, this paper will not deal with the complex relation between art, artists and the gentrifications process of urban cities. It is a highly relevant topic when working with art in public space, but such issues have already been explored thoughtfully elsewhere¹ and are to be seen as a complement to the discussion in this paper.



You are sitting at the skybar Heaven 23 in Gothia Towers. You have headphones on and a glass of water have just been served by the hostess who met you at the entrance. Through the panorama window you are looking down at Korsvägen. A voice starts talking in the headphones.

- Welcome.

I hope you got your water and have made yourself comfortable.

How nice that we could arrange a meeting right here.

We are 77 meters up in the air.

This is the start of *Let's meet in Göteborg*, a site-specific audiowalk created in 2014². It is part of a series of performative works for public locations focusing on urban gentrified city centres - *The Event Series*. In the works I transform the hidden stories and operations at the urban location into tangible matter by unpacking the architecture and the place. Each work finds its own form and format. This one - *Let's meet in Göteborg* - became an audio-walk. The audio script uses cut-up techniques mixing quotes from contemporary texts on branding the city as the ultimate meeting place, old texts on migration when 1,3 million Swedes left the country for America through Göteborg in the 19th century, and texts on the conditions when the city was founded on a clay bay 400 years ago. I will use this work to bounce off questions and dilemmas that occur when navigating public spaces.

The works I create operate in between poetics, politics and action. They can be discussed, felt and analysed, and are an embodied critical analysis in themselves. My concern, in this paper, is how the artistic "knowledge production" about these urban locations can be shared and contribute to society at large, apart from presenting the work, yet avoiding just "sharing the process" and avoiding an instrumentalization of the artist's tricks in order to distil it and equip the workforces of tomorrow in the neo-capitalist society. And how to navigate different value systems and artistic research in relation to this?

A Changing Public Space

The turning point that moved me towards *The Event Series* was a situation around 2010 when one of my works for public space, *Minutes 2.0*, a pop-up dance theatre piece for offices and public locations, more and more often was perceived by the public not as performance art, but as a commercial. A few years earlier the audience perceived the same works as street theatre, enjoying an alternative experience for a short moment. Now, when the work appeared it was met by a cautious suspicion about why we were there. "What are you selling?" became the most common audience reaction. The work was perceived as an event that wanted to sell a product on show somewhere, as an instrument for commercial interests. An event that talked to the wallets of the spectators, not to their hearts or brains. How did this change in reception come about?

I would argue that the situation was a consequence of a changing landscape for performative art and body-based expressions in the public space. A striking analysis of this terrain in change is provided by crossreading Nina Björk (2012) and Dan Jönsson (2012). Both are examining and questioning a society and an art concept in change. Björk by exploring how the economic measurement systems have entered our lives on all levels the last few years. Jönsson by analysing ten Swedish art scandals 2000 – 2010 that has challenged the concept of art, thereby outlining border conflicts between art and reality, art's autonomy and the artist's responsibility. Björk argues that the political and economic development in Sweden in recent years has encouraged a view on human life itself as a question of profit, pushing people to ask the same basic question facing every situation in life: What's in it for me? What's a possible profit for me? A tendency to calculate, always calculate potential loss and gain.

The audience watching the pop-up piece clearly went into calculating mode, not an emotional or intellectual experience mode. At the same period performative expressions such as flash mobs, happenings and participatory events became increasingly used as commercials in the public realm. A famous example is the British T-mobile flash mob dance at Liverpool Street Station 2009 (T-Mobile 2015). It was filmed and spread as a commercial for a mobile network operator encouraging people to share images via their phones. So how would an audience distinguish between art and a commercial event? And how would you as an art practitioner position yourself in this terrain if you want to create work that is considered art in dialogue with its socio-political context? The format for the pop-up pieces was clearly no longer the answer for public spaces in urban city centers.

If my artistic practice and choreographic craft were to be considered knowledge – how would we phrase the situation? A craft and knowledge that is made redundant because it's no longer creating the desired outcomes? Or a knowledge that can be used for new "business opportunities"? If valued in money – I would probably be able to gain a lot of money using my choreographic craft and knowledge about the pop-up pieces for commercials. But if valued in how it spurs a critical dialogue and reflective thinking – the value was now down to the bottom. And how would we talk about value systems for levels of critical and reflective engagement in art and public space, a space immersed with economic value systems?

Art and the borders of political discussions

Jönsson (2012) describes how the political discussions that an artwork wants to raise often disappear in a fog of aesthetics. He argues that the explanation lays in the ambiguous perception of art's autonomy: in the romantic image of art as a field for reality-tests, a "free zone" where else unthinkable transformations are possible. In practice, the idea of the free zone has a preservative effect. Contemporary art is accepted as a free zone for a radical, system-critical, and political discussions - on condition that it stays within the boundaries of the art world. Freedom of art is worth nothing if it is not also possible to switch into a genuine political freedom - and autonomy consists in the ability to show this freedom. He argues that in order to gain autonomy and

freedom, you need to know where the borders are. And this discussion is ongoing by artistic practices.

Would it be possible and stay in the public space and achieve the critical dialogues and reflections I was aiming for? Or would I need to move into a context where reflection and critical thinking is core, such as the academic and artistic research context? My artistic response to the situation was to aim for the most gentrified, commercialized and eventized urban locations, in order to test the borders by making site-specific performative art at these locations.



- Together we create the image of Gothenburg.

Many of us are talking about the destination Gothenburg and we do it in many different contexts. Thus, we are all part of the brand. Our main competitive advantage is to jointly pursue our development and marketing of the destination.

- Have you read the ad?

One of North America's largest and most solid rail and land-owning companies, Pennsylvania Central Railway in Newyerk, has decided that in the State of Michigan construct three Swedish colonies, where migrants on very favorable terms can obtain land and completed houses. For 300 families the opportunity is already prepared to around 23 next September depart with ship from Gothenburg to the colony county.

- Every day, 30 000 people pass Korsvägen. At peak times, there are four departures per minute.

The Event Series

In 2014 I started *The Event Series*, an art project that in gentrified and commercialized urban city centres explores how it is possible to create and propose performative art and artistic practice that; through the body talks about/to our society; reflects these urban environments in their complexity; invites people to critical reflexion, artistic experience and exchange of ideas; creates both deconstruction and production on location; and moves in a landscape in between criticality

and poetry. I create a series of site specific works, and develop a discourse for the tacit knowledge and expertise involved in this practice that through the body talks about/to and in public space about late modern life in the urban landscape.

As the first site of exploration I work with the Swedish city Gothenburg, and the Gothenburg's Event District "Evenemangstråket". Gothenburg's development is similar to that of many mid-sized cities in Northern Europe, in its quest to transform itself from an industrial city to an information-, university- or event city. *Evenemangstråket* – Gothenburg's Event District is therefore functioning as terrain, case study and the specific location for the first explorations and creations in the series. It is a market-driven area, where most activities and events are packaged as products on sale.

Art as product?

Since the early 2000 there has in Sweden been two parallel developments in how artists are encouraged to operate. One is pushing the artists to become entrepreneurs, develop their art as products and apply business models to their artistic practice. At the same time, there has also been an increased attention to creativity, artistic methods and processes as tools for regeneration and development.

David Karlsson (2010) expose in a Swedish context the complexity and how it relates to cultural as well as business and industry politics. When traditional business models are applied to artistic activities, it tends to clash and create a complex situation where parallel and opposing value-systems are at play at the same time. Most forms of cultural production can, according to Bourdieu, be considered as a field structured between the poles of cultural capital and economic capital. At one pole is the pure art's anti-economic economy, a non-commercial economy characterized by the accumulation of symbolic capital. At the other pole is the literary and artistic industries' economic logic, which considers trading in cultural goods like any other trading whatsoever. (Bourdieu 1992/2000: 16). What distinguishes cultural production and circulation from other types of production is that it takes place between these two poles. Anyone who is active in these fields must constantly deal with two different kinds of currencies, currencies that are not convertible, but in the world of culture are yet always whisked together. (Karlsson 2010: 119-120)

But if we do not only take into account the survival of an artwork, but also the survival of the artist, a different frame emerges in these discussions if we account for the artistic skills required to sustain the Life side of the supposed Art/Life binary. The perception of autonomy of art in relation to economic capital is achieved through a kind of disavowal of the support system for both art and the artist. Shannon Jackson (2011) outlines how the 'disavowal of support' is the illusory trick needed to create the effect of an autonomous work of art: "The perception of autonomy is once again achieved through a kind of disavowal, a disavowal of the tax breaks, military pensions, public schools, wifely labour, house keepers, off-shoring, [public funding for art] and a capitalist alienation that allows certain persons to believe themselves to be unfettered and individually responsible for their private success." (Jackson 2011: 36).

In order to navigate in this terrain, the sender of a work is an important question. For an audience and a specific artwork, the sender/producer influence how the work might be read and in which discussions it will take part. *Let's meet in Göteborg* was commissioned and co-produced by ICIA – Institute of Contemporary Ideas and Art³, an independent art organisation led by curator Anna van der Vliet. The work was presented at *Motbilder/Counterparts*, an extensive exhibition that took place August to September 2014 at various locations around Gothenburg, with works that in different ways tackled the public realm in artistic, political, and activist ways. The sender *Counterparts* was for me an important context for the work.

In Sweden artists are expected to focus on selling their art/products as a complement to

public funding, as a way to finance their artistic practice and their lives. In this terrain, each artist has to make decisions on where to situate oneself and once practice. Among the commercial, instrumental, and non-commercial, where is it interesting to enter in order to make a difference? Which alliances are you willing to make in order to balance survival, possibilities to instigate change, and artistic autonomy?

Artistic Stance on why Performative Art in Public Space

Performative art is a significant practice that can hold and activate the complexity of being humans together in an urban environment. To me, performative art in public space is the activity where art, politics and poetry can meet in one action. That's why I keep on exploring it. Public space is important. We do take to the streets to make our voices heard in times of changes. The public spaces in a city is also a place where the city want's to present itself. Not necessarily reflecting how the city or situation is in reality, but how it would like to be perceived. Thereby it is continually contesting the borders between reality and the image of the urban reality. In *Let's meet in Göteborg* I aimed for heightening this plurality of images of the same location, by jump-cutting different statements about Korsvägen and Gothenburg as a place you want to go to, leave, or pass through, on your way to a better life.

The work takes place in the intersection of two registers – performative art and site-specific art. Performative is here understood as temporal embodied acts. Site-specificity is conceived as what art historian Rosalyn Deutsche (1998, xi) calls an interdisciplinary space and discourse which combines “ideas about art, architecture, and urban design, on the one hand, with theories of the city, social space, and public space on the other”. The concept of site is here understood not simply as a geographical location or an architectural setting, but includes a social situation, a network of social relations, stories, facts, events, present and absent bodies, and a choreographed manner in which bodies are encouraged to move, act and think in relation to the site. The criticality explored is to be understood as a potential to evoke critical thinking.

My stance is that the art of choreography consists of distributing bodies, their relations and actions in space. It allocates certain positions to specific bodies, thereby distributing power, normativity, resources and space for action and movement. Choreography and performative art in public space can be used as a practice to play out the tensions and positions of bodies in public space, as a practice of differentiation that explores the tensions of present and absent bodies, actions and voices, and thereby acts politically. It can explore how architecture calls for certain types of bodies and movements, and excludes others.

Originally I'm trained as choreographer and dancer in contemporary dance, and my practice has its origin in the German Tanztheater (e.g. Pina Bausch) and the British physical theatre (e.g. DV8). In *The Event Series* I've mainly created performative works for public spaces, combining spoken text, performativity, film and choreographic actions. I do not create dance in a traditional sense, but push the boundaries for an interdisciplinary choreographic practice in public spaces.

I'm interested in working *with* a location and its complex situation. Not against. Yet keeping an artistic autonomy for the practice, my works and me. The question to constantly deal with is what to work *with*, and what not? Especially in places where conflicting interests and perspectives are operating at the same time, and where some voices are very strong, others weak. How do you balance autonomy, responsibility and alliances with your purpose and aim?



You are standing outside the only public toilet at Korsvägen. You have checked that it is not occupied. You open the door and as you enter the smell of urine meets you. You enter, the door slams shut behind you and the traffic sounds disappear.

- *You can lock the door so you get to be alone.*
- *Hundreds of thousands of emigrants pass Gothenburg to spend a few days while waiting for a berth on a ship.*
- *By the way, where are you staying tonight?*
- *Gothenburg is the absolute elite of the international meeting industry, and located right here is Northern Europe's largest integrated meeting place. Last year 3.7 million hotel rooms were booked, that is a new record. New awaited capacity was added at the hotels, and more will be added this year. Investment drives growth and is essential for destination development, and the new capacity in the hotel sector makes Gothenburg meet the market demand in a better and more balanced way.*
- *In a hotel room of this size lived up to 15 people. Kerosene lamps went out from lack of oxygen. When they then got on the ship, it was just as crowded. They had to find a place somewhere under the deck with their luggage, and then stay there packed together without light. About a hundred of them would die on the way. The water ran out, the food rotted, they could not wash themselves, the air was stale, and vermin came with the boat. A container.*

Artistic Research as a complementary arena

I have an interest in the socio-political context of art, and is often engaged in discussions on artistic practice and its context. But in recent years I have noticed, just as choreographer Efva Lilja express that today “it is often easier to sell ideas and debates than artistic products and

actions. The notion of art as the realm of free thought and an activating force as opposed to consumerist passivity, is moving away from the market towards the academic world.” (Lilja 2015:101). In recent years artistic research has entered the eco-system of artistic practice and activity, providing a complementary arena to the market. It includes a wide variety of interests and topics, and is generally concerned with exploring artistic practice and methods. From the perspective of being in a market situation for performative art, with short time for production, the academic context of artistic research appears to be an attractive context with its focus on in-depth research and experimentation in artistic practice.

The question then is where you want to place your activities? Who, at the market and within the research context, is interested in which parts of your activities? Who is willing to pay for them, and why?

Art and culture as instrument

Culture has throughout history been used as an instrument, often as an instrument for power and control, or preservations of traditions. But since 1990s art and culture has increasingly attracted attention as an instrument for economic regeneration and progress. The focus has been to extract the skills and tools of artistic creativity in order to apply them in a business and educational context. The artist is engaged not as a maker of art, but as a creative consultant using creative methods and processes as tools in educational and development processes.

A recent example of a successful project, according to the above argument, is a project where an artist has been engaged to develop a municipality⁴. During 18 months the artist worked with the mission to bring Ale Municipality on the map and turn a small community to a place with potential, initiative and courage. In the invitation to a seminar in April 2015 titled “Attractive municipalities” the organiser TILLT write:

“All municipalities want to increase and enhance the accessibility to the public space, encourage interaction between people, create communities, hope, and faith in our future. How can artistic approaches strengthen the attraction to smaller municipalities and help to create commitment, positive charge, new associations and curiosity? We take a starting point in Ale Municipality’s travel from forgotten to attractive and innovative municipality.” (TILLT, 2015)

When creating art in public space, it is important to ask yourself if you want your work to be part of the regeneration development, or if you want to problematize or resist it. Some times there is a very fine line between encourage and to oppose.

Let’s meet in Göteborg aimed for providing reflective critique through the work, and I was not interested in using my creative processes as tools for further regeneration of the location.

Creative Processes

Because of the increased importance given to creativity in society at large, there has been an urge for understanding the creative processes that underpin the artistic activities. Where does artistic research and you as artist in an academic context situate yourself in relation to this development? What is the aim and purpose of exploring and documenting artistic processes, methods and artworks?

There is no single answer to this question. It differs between countries and institutions, and in a very diversified field of research there is a great variety of attitudes. Some wants to make art an academic field within the university structures. Some are interested in exploring artistic methods in non-art fields. Others look upon artistic research as a way to develop art. (Lilja 2015). Compared to the art market the artistic research context appears to be a terrain free from traditional market expectations, even if academic research and education organisations are

required to confine to efficiency driven logics of economics, as any institution in society today (EduFactory Journal 2011).

As artist, this development is also part of the terrain in which you navigate. If you are interested in being part of developing society through art, are you interested in doing it through your creative methods, through participating in discussions, or through your artworks? And where do you draw the line between process, method and artwork?

The process of *Let's meet in Göteborg*

In the process of creating site specific works I spend time at the location and talk to a lot of different people who have a relation to the place. It is people who work at the site, people who walk their dogs, staff who have info about buildings or businesses, specialists in topics that are related to the site such as archeologists, bus timetable-planners, architects and oak tree specialists. Knowledge, information and reflections from these dialogues are part of the material I work with. Using my bodymind as a seismograph I look for places and situations of tensions, dissonance and disjoint facts and feelings. From the outcomes of the embodied attention to the location, I start to unpack the site and create the work. I create performative works on site where I give back information about the location, but in a new format that puts light on previously invisible or hidden aspects. Reality layered on reality.

Although the creation process often includes a lot of people that I'm in dialogue with over time, I do not consider the creation process to be the artwork. My focus is on the critical potential of the artwork that is created *out of* this process, how it resonates at the site, among the audience/participants and in society in general.

In *Let's meet in Göteborg* I started from Korsvägen as location, one of Gothenburg's largest travel junctions for buses and trams, and also marketed as the city's biggest meeting place with the Swedish Exhibition and Congress centre just next to it. I was struck by the disjoint experience of never really meeting anyone at Korsvägen since most people are in a hurry to their destination, and the marketing of the place as the most attractive meeting place. I was also struck by the contrast between two buildings facing each other across the junction; the old heritage wooden mansion with fruitgarden – Johanneberg Landeri from late 1700, and the three hypermodern mirror-covered high-rises Gothia Towers.

The process led to create an audiowalk from the Skybar at Gothia Towers to one of the benches in the fruitgarden of Johanneberg Landeri, with a theme of desired destinations, emigration and the dream about a better life. It is only a walk of 200 meters. I created a script mixing quotes from existing texts on Gothenburg, together with the narrators instructions on where to go and what to do next.



- I have arranged so that you have money for your trip. It is in your small bag, in the small compartment at the bottom.

You take out a coin of 5 kronor.

- You can buy a piece of chocolate for 5 kronor here at Espresso House. You can also give it to someone in need. Or keep it for yourself and your own future needs.

- The choice is yours.

Where and how can the work spur critical dialogues?

In order to find a reflective context where to critically discuss an artwork's potential to be a source of knowledge and an embodied critical analysis of contemporary society, I take part in seminars and conferences related to artistic research. But I'm debating with myself if this is the right move. It is here time to return to Jönsson's (2012) argument that art's ability to put problems into debate is both a protected and inflated notion. No matter how radical, subversive and activist the art is, as long as it is art it will remain art, and thereby stay at the "right" side of reality, and not reach impact in political discussion in society in general. If I move from the market into the academia, I'm still operating in an art-related context. If we follow Jönson's argument it will make no difference, and still not reach impact in society in general. However, I do get a critical collegial context, which is a great value in developing arguments and a discourse.

Conclusion

Creating art in gentrified urban city centers, and being interested in critical dialogues in and through art, requires you to navigate a terrain with several value-systems at play simultaneously. It is a public space in change, where commercial interests and a profit-making logic prevails. You navigate between cultural and economic capital, the perception of your art as product or knowledge, production and research, the survival of the art as well as the artist, the context as a

society and a market, and different instrumental approaches to your artistic activities.

My navigation is steered by my interest in creating performative art in urban public space. These locations are complex, just as our contemporary society is. I'm interested in balancing on the fine line of working *with*, yet subversive in between criticality and poetry in order to communicate about the not yet articulated.

As artist and practitioner you have to make your decisions of where and how you want to situate yourself and your practice. And you need to re-situate yourself over and over again since the landscape is continually changing.



Photos

By Maja Kekonius: page 2, Petra Ahlqvist: page 10, Marika Hedemyr: page 4, 7, 11.

The images are from the location at which *Let's meet in Göteborg* took place. The texts are excerpts from the audio script.

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Notes

¹ See for example Deutsche, Rosalyn (1998) *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*. Graham Foundation / MIT Press. Cohen, Phil (2013) *On The Wrong Side Of The Track? East London And The Post Olympics*. Lawrence & Wishart. Pratt, A. C. (2009). "Urban regeneration: from the arts 'feel good' factor to the cultural economy. A case study of Hoxton, London." *Urban Studies* 46 (5-6): 1041-1061.

² Commissioned and co-produced by ICIA – Institute of Contemporary Ideas and Art. Presented at Motbilder/Counterparts 2014, curated by Anna van der Vliet.

³ ICIA: www.icia.se

⁴ The project "Ale Kommun 2013 – 2015" has been organised by TILLT, an organisation that develop people, business and society through art and culture. www.tillt.se