The Journal of Public Space
ISSN 2206-9658
2025 | Vol. 10 n. 2
https://www.journalpublicspace.org

Public Space Performs.
Creative Explorations of Performativity in Public Space

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Abstract
This article is an extended contribution from a paper originally presented as part of the 2024 conference Past, Present and Future of Public Space in Bologna, promoted by City Space Architecture, under the same title. The discussion here focuses on an understanding of the public sphere as a "performative arrangement" (Cartiere and Zebracki, 2016), looking at the ways in which art can contribute new insights into this concept, thereby promoting new possibilities in taking ownership of, as well as consciously experiencing the choreographic, sensorial and aesthetic dimension of public space. Challenging an understanding of public art that relegates this to mere urban decoration and to necessarily entailing permanent artworks in public space, here the emphasis is on public art as interdisciplinary practice, spanning pedagogy, artistic making, curating, programming and academia. Whether through participatory projects, interactive installations and ephemeral interventions, public spaces may be reimagined and their potential reacquainted with.
The article draws on the author's previous writing on 'Performing Museography' (2023) and 'Critical Theatricality' (2021), as well as on the pedagogical ethos embedded in the Masters of Public Art and Performative Practices at London Metropolitan University. Examples from practice are utilised to reflect on the principles discussed here and their applicability in a real-life working context.
Distinguishing the concept of performativity from that of performance (Von Hantelman, 2014), this contribution nevertheless sees both within a continuum of experiences, in which the dialogical relationship between public, space and time is creatively reinterpreted through artistic intervention. According to this understanding, artistic practices that deal with the performative dimension of public space may function as ways to champion the latter's cultural and human value, as well as to address the inherent complexities and challenges related to this.

Keywords: Public art, participation, performance, performativity, city, public space

To cite this article:
Scarso, J. L. (2025) "Public Space Performs: Creative explorations of performativity in public space", *The Journal of Public Space*, 10(2). pp. 5-24. doi: 10.32891/jps.v10i2.1878.

This article has been double blind peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.

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It is no surprise that the phrase 'public art' may be so difficult to define: one only needs to think of how its embedded terms 'art' and 'public' are just as slippery, porous and often with conflicting connotations. Yet, in my experience, when asking people what images this phrase conjures up, there is a startling similarity in their responses: we often think of public art as large works of, typically, sculpture, somewhere outdoors. While this image may of course represent an important example of public art, it is significant that it dominates our collective subconscious, drawing a key connection between this practice and its roots in that of traditional, chiefly imperialist, monuments. There is a hierarchical implication in this genealogy: the object of art tends to display grandiose proportions and a projection into eternity – it is permanent, authoritative and of an assumed universal valence; it is supposed to mark public space, but in doing so it often takes space away from the public, who is supposed to accept its found presence as a gift from above, from the powers that be.

As a critical response to this tendency, in this article, I aim to explore an approach to public art research, bringing together insights from my own artistic and curatorial practices, as well as from the pedagogical strategies developed in the dedicated postgraduate programme that I will outline in the following paragraphs. Here, public art is argued as intrinsically connected with the performative dimension of the public sphere. Within this understanding, it is the relational quality of public art that is highlighted in this perspective, promoting an intentional fluidity across the acts of creating, curating, researching, teaching and learning. Rather than seeing these as discrete activities, this approach is about looking for a continuum between these, as a way to embrace the complexity of this field and attempt a more nuanced understanding of this.

Before delving deeper into these issues, it is necessary to address some of the key complexities that underpin this subject. Firstly, what do we mean by "public"? Warner's influential perspective (2002) challenges the ideological assumptions that treat the public as stable, cohesive and self-evident. Warner argues that publics are not pre-existing entities; rather, they are constituted through discourse, such as texts, media and speech. In this sense, the public – as a broader collective distinct from individual audiences – is produced through communication itself. Warner also introduces the concept of *counterpublics*, referring to alternative or marginalised publics that emerge in response to exclusion from dominant public discourse. This idea resonates with other perspectives, such as Jacques Rancière's notion of *dissensus* (2010). Rancière argues that the public dimension should not automatically be understood as democratic or inclusive; instead, it is structured by ideological arrangements that determine who can be seen and heard, which he describes as the "distribution of the sensible". Within this framework, political action occurs when these structures are challenged or disrupted through acts of dissensus. This can be further linked to Chantal Mouffe's concept of *agonistic pluralism* (2013), which emphasises the inevitability of conflict within democratic societies. Rather than eliminating conflict, democracy should provide a framework in which competing political projects can confront one another publicly, while still recognising each other as legitimate adversaries.

Understanding these principles complexifies seemingly straightforward notions of publicness, including that of public space. To reference Lefebvre (1991), rather than being neutral, public spaces are shaped by competing meanings, power relations and social exclusions, and are therefore contingent on the specific socio-political contexts in

which they exist. Moreover, as digital, virtual and AI technologies rapidly reshape our lived experience, our understanding of public space cannot be confined to a physical location. Even when understood in its logistical meaning, public space cannot be seen in isolation from the ways in which it is consistently mediated by digital platforms: such "cybergeographic encounters" (Zebracki, 2018), referring to the interactions and experiences that occur when digital technologies and physical spaces overlap, may be extended not only to social media communication, but also to the platforms utilised for urban data infrastructures and mapping technologies.

Just as publicness is a multifaceted concept, so is the interdisciplinary language of contemporary public art: here, media used may not only vary but blur with one another, beyond the confines of the artefact as a three-dimensional object. Public art may take place in the immaterial, the digital, the virtual and of course the ephemeral. What makes it "public", aside from its free access and non-commercial nature, is, I propose, how it interacts with the public sphere, be this a physical location or indeed a virtual one. This emphasis on the phrase 'public sphere' captures, as pointed out by Hewitt and Jordan (2016), a dimension in this type of practice that is not stuck in the implication of simply siting an artwork in an outside.

The public is neither an empirical body, nor a spatial concept. The public sphere is a performative arrangement; it is the activity of 'going public' or 'making something public' that fills particular places and spaces with public life. (Hewitt & Jordan, 2016, pp. 27-28).

It is this dimension of public art that I would like to emphasise here as complexifying this field and challenging its stereotypical connotations. This notion of performative arrangement conjures up further nuances in art. Significantly, the vernacular of contemporary art has embraced the word "performative" often to simply mean performance itself or what resembles it. This is somewhat different from the roots of this word in philosophy and the social sciences, which, as reminded by Von Hantellman (2014), points at the implicit codes of both verbal and non-verbal communication that determine the relationships between people and context, and, in doing so, can be seen as "reality-producing". The inclusion of performance in an art programme is not in itself constitute performative practice: Von Hantelmann, in fact, goes as far as to say that the premise of much performance art that seeks to operate outside of the given social conventions of established behavioural settings in a given space (e.g. an art gallery) implicitly opposes to the very idea of performativity, in that the latter expressly relies on such conventions (ibid.). Rather, in art, Von Hantelmann suggests that this understanding of the performative "brings into perspective (…) the contingent and difficult to grasp realm of impact and effects that art brings forth both situationally, i.e. in a given spatial and discursive context, and relationally, e.g. in relation to a viewer or a public" (pp. 12-13).

As argued in my previous writing (2021 and 2023), I prefer an understanding of performativity that is envisaged as a spectrum of possibilities, ranging from the explicitly and consciously performed to the embedded performativity of social conventions. If, as argued by Von Hantelmann, all art is implicitly performative according to the philosophical understanding of this term, I propose that art that deals with publicness is performative to an even higher degree. And, to go back to Hewitt and Jordan, I would argue that it is the degree of performativity, as opposed to simply where the work is sited, that justifies its understanding as "public art" first and foremost: the conscious way in which it relates to the viewer, to the relationship between viewers and the one

between the latter and the situational setting in which it takes place – crucially, the public realm.

Let me cite two examples to illustrate this understanding. The first one is *The Teeter Totter Wall* by Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello (2019), awarded Design of the Year 2020 (Bakare, 2021). This intervention on the US-Mexican border, across different locations between El Paso in Texas and Ciudad Juárez in Mexico, saw a range of colourful seesaws temporarily (for forty minutes only) installed on the barrier structure that marks the border: a site embedded with connotations of separation and restriction, famously championed by the first Trump administration and significantly reprised in the current one. The bright colouring of these seesaws denoted a playful and family-orientated experience. The seesaws were placed in such a way that both sides would be in the respective countries, so that they could only be activated by people on the US and on the Mexican sides both taking part. Images of children playing on the seesaws from both countries were widely disseminated via social media, crucially highlighting the socioeconomic contrast between participants on both sides.

In another example, artist Alberto Garutti created an installation at Piazza Gae Aulenti, Milan (2010-2012) entitled *Opera dedicata a chi passando di qui penserà alle voci e ai suoni della città* ("Work dedicated to those who, passing by, will think of the voices and sounds of the city"). Made of large brass pipes resembling musical instruments in a circular structure, it enables each pipe to connect with different parts of the buildings and locations around the square (the car-park, municipal offices, etc.), conducting the real-life sounds from these to the central structure. The visitor is invited to come close to each pipe extremity and listen, unaware of the location that this is connected to, contemplating the sounds heard (Speltra, 2012).

Both of these public artworks embody the spectrum of performativity discussed in this article. Significantly, while they could be appreciated in their sculptural form in both cases, their activation by the public is what gives meaning to the artistic concepts behind. There are different levels of performativity taking place: the invitation of the sculptural designs to 'take part' through playful aesthetics, subverting the behavioural codes expected in the locations utilised; the actual actions of the public engaging that are essential to activate the installations; the spectatorial position of the onlookers, watching the public engage and implicitly invited to do the same; lastly, the further public sphere engendered by the social media dissemination of the engagement.

Both works engage with sociopolitical messages: the former, by physicalising the shared space that challenges populist agendas on national and cultural separation; the latter, by democratising our experience of the city, engaging with its workings beyond the confines of what is institutionally presented as public space. Crucially, both works exemplify an approach to public art that challenges monumental fixity: rather than focusing on the object of display, assumed as permanent in its signification, it is the relational experience enabled by the public's engagement that makes these works dynamic, dialogical and consciously transcending disciplinary categories. Works of this kind have indeed represented reference points for envisaging how public art can continue to be reframed through artistic practice, pedagogy and research, as I will aim to explicate in the following paragraphs.

Navigating artistic, curatorial and academic practices

The aim of this article is to establish a panorama of practices and considerations around the performativity of public space, in order to propose new approaches in the way in which this can be understood, creatively explored and programmed for. A key aspect of this will be connecting learnings from pedagogy, art practice, curating and scholarly research, in order to provide an interdisciplinary perspective from which to combine new insights, with the aim of establishing an original contribution to knowledge in this field.

In establishing the focus of this discussion, it is important to frame my own positionality, with a particular emphasis on the combination of roles that has enabled such interdisciplinary perspective on this subject. Interdisciplinarity in my own work did not always stem out of a conscious choice, but, rather, of an attempt to make sense of eclectic interests. Following my training in the performing arts, much of the early years of my practice was based on exploring how to stretch theatricality beyond the confines of the dedicated theatre space, proactively fusing site-responsive methods with different performance, design and dramaturgical approaches. This became the ethos of my company Elastic Theatre, in turn becoming the subject of my doctoral studies (2014). Since then, three parallel developments have informed my practice: firstly, the expansion of my artistic work into public-focused installations and live art combined with VR (examples of the latter can be found in my collaborations with Anise Gallery at Tate Modern and London Festival of Architecture); secondly, my progressive move into curating, now as Senior Curator of Fondazione Marta Czok, programming its exhibitions from its bases in Rome and Venice, as well as its international projects; thirdly, the continuing development of my academic work, with the aim to ensure that both professional practice and teaching are equally research-led. Indeed, the HE context of my work, as Reader in Art and Performance at London Metropolitan University, has enabled strategies to pursue a multi-level approach to public art: one in which pedagogical principles, artistic experimentation and curatorial activities may interrogate one another concomitantly and provide new insights for the development of other artists and professionals in the field, without claiming universal "formulas" to do so. Indeed, as I will explain below, the insights produced by this approach are typically explicated as new interrogation points, with which to (re)frame creative interventions in the public sphere, be these my own, my peers', my students' or the ones fostered by public organisations in the sector.

It should be said that, like many creative professionals, I have often experienced such combination of strategies in an ambivalent way: at once an exciting opportunity to keep furthering the reach of my work, but also a source of creative dilemmas in relation to how to define myself within the artistic and academic sectors. Progressively, I have identified in my interest in publicness what confers cohesion to my overall work and research endeavours, drawing artistic, curatorial and academic interests together: I have found myself becoming somewhat an advocate for public art and public space, working alongside several organisations in the roles of trustee (The Line Public Art Walk, London), advisor (City Space Architecture and Public Space Academy) and public speaker. In turn, such roles have further informed my creative practice, research efforts and pedagogical ethos.

A dedicated Masters

In 2020, I launched at London Metropolitan University the Masters in Public Art and Performative Practices. It is significant that its original title was 'Public Art and Performance', as it was thought that the word performative may confuse prospective candidates. My reservations with the original title were that this may be misunderstood as meaning that performance, in a theatrical sense, would be taught as part of it, whereas it is precisely the interdisciplinarity of performative practices, in whichever medium, that is at the core of this programme: the situational potential for any art form to create meaningful dialogue with public space and with its stakeholders. The course has since attracted candidates from across the world and across disciplines: fine art, theatre, film, digital media, architecture, curating, urbanism and social practice.

A key aspect of this course is its international ethos in fostering connections across the world, so that ideas of what constitutes public art can be continuously redefined and understood according to a multiplicity of perspectives. This effort has been substantially aided by existent networks enabling dialogues both within and outside of academia: to date, institutions and organisations like Tate, MUVE (Fondazione dei Musei Civici di Venezia), City of London Corporation, London Festival of Architecture, Tower Bridge, Museo Spazio Pubblico (Bologna) and The Line; university collaborations including Fontys University (Tilburg) and RMIT (Melbourne); last but not least, dedicated global networks such as City Space Architecture continue to provide important links with researchers and professionals in the sector.



Figure 1. Students from the MA Public Art and Performative Practices in a public exhibition at America Square, Aldgate, London. London Metropolitan University.

Aside from enhancing the profile of the programme, internationality means that multiple perspectives and creative strategies may be examined, so that public art is understood beyond the confines of the given settings of a London-based course: this in turn echoes

the vision of a global network of socially engaged arts pedagogy, as advocated by Merlino and Stewart (2015). While it is important to understand how UK-specific organisations operate (creatively, socially, legally and financially), researching other realities, with their own challenges and opportunities, encourages students to see themselves as cosmopolitan practitioners, appreciating the value of cross-cultural dialogue as fundamental in their work. In this sense, this internationality is consistently counterbalanced by an emphasis on the local, so that we keep highlighting how the "public" always is a sited reality: rather than looking for universal answers, therefore, the global dimension is understood as the combination of innumerable local ones, which can be compared and which can share experiences with one another, in their idiosyncratic characteristics.

Methodological approaches

It is significant that designing a Masters that caters specifically to the performative dimension of public art has provided in itself the stimulus for expanding and refining methodological framings of the work: this reflects the role of education, particularly within a postgraduate context, of not only imparting new knowledge, but also establishing and reinforcing the principles via which such knowledge can be produced through creative practice as research, and new levels of inquiry can be promoted for future generations of researchers and practitioners. In this sense, the relationship between pedagogy, creative practice and academia should not be seen in strict hierarchical orders, but rather as a dynamic discourse, reprising Bishop's argument about the integration of pedagogy and participatory art as creating a new language in its own right, one that allows us to perpetually question assumptions and reinvent our processes of investigation (2012).

In the context of this type of investigation, the interdisciplinary nature of the work becomes a key factor in framing the methodology used: beyond the previously mentioned specific instance of my own work, this approach intentionally draws together the perspectives stemming from different specialisms, such as those of artists, educators, curators, community practitioners and urbanists. Recurrent questions that guide such research include:

- What is the performative potential of art in public space and how does this provide a renewed understanding of the role of creative practice in the public realm?
- What is the role of the public in public art and to what extent should this inform the process of art creation?
- What is the role of the artist in public art and how should it relate to the one of the public, so as to maintain freedom of expression and assert its expertise?
- How may art practices, in their performative dimension, reframe our experiences of a city, the built environment and the spaces between buildings?

While the scope of this article could not possibly answer these questions exhaustively, my aim here is to demonstrate how these questions may underpin new modes of envisioning and understanding the role of art in the public sphere, as well as activating the performative dimensions that this may engender.

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of this field, combinations of methods may significantly vary from project to project, depending on the context in which this is sited and on the disciplinary perspective that may be emphasised. Standard methods may include observation, case studies, literary analysis and focus groups. Yet all of these merge with other methods that stem from the more elusive framework of arts-based research. Here, outcomes may be less tangible, often tacitly embedded in one's practice. The distinction between method and finding may be less explicit (Knowles and Ardra, 2008): the process of creation may represent at once both a methodological vehicle and the outcome of an inquiry (Borgdorff, 2010), thus significantly blurring the phases of research. It is through continuous reflexivity (De Freitas, 2008), that such blurring may be mitigated, in order to ensure research rigour.

Subjectivity is invariably a challenge in this type of research: according to the above principles, arts-based research cannot ignore its own positionality, where the same practitioner that engages in creative practice through their own individual lived experience and interpretation may also be the one framing such practice as a research activity. Moreover, subjectivity is inherent to the experience of the public, which is in itself informed by each individual's own background, beliefs and circumstantial factors when encountering creative practice in public space. Such subjectivity has traditionally been mitigated by emphasising quantifiable methods of research in public engagement, in order to empirically measure its cultural value: a process that has tended to adopt "a mainly instrumental, economic position in order to satisfy government concerns over funding and the 'measurement' of the value of culture more generally, while marginalising its intangible, qualitative dimensions" (Lehman, Wickham, and Fillis, 2021, p.1). Kaszynska (2021), citing recent developments in the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), reports a cultural shift in approaching this challenge, with a renewed emphasis on the individuality of experience and on ways to explore this beyond standard quantitative methods, including arts-based and phenomenology-grounded approaches.

In a recent research project with public art production company Artichoke (Scarso & Thompson, 2022; Kim & Scarso, 2024), we specifically looked at alternative ways in which the impact of public art may not simply be measured via statisticsAudiences may give value numbers through questionnaires, but the more meaningful data is often found in the subjective, anecdotal stories that are difficult to capture. Looking through archival material by the company, we were able to explore the many ways in which Artichoke has been able to collect evidence of deep engagement with their productions – such as *The Sultan's Elephant* (2006), *Lumiere* (2009-ongoing) and *Processions* (2018) – particularly focusing on methods that combined creative practice with public interactions. A powerful example was the project *Sanctuary* (2022): built by the local community, this temporary memorial to COVID-19 victims was erected for one week. Visitors were invited to inscribe wooden pieces with messages to loved ones lost during the pandemic and attach them to the structure. Conceived by artist David Best as a form of collective catharsis, the memorial culminated in the burning of the structure, symbolising closure in shared grief. The installation attracted approximately 16,700 visitors during the week, including around 10,000 who attended the burning event, and received further exposure through national press and BBC coverage. Beyond its undeniable success in terms of reach, *Sanctuary* exemplifies an approach to public art that incorporates less quantifiable yet equally significant forms of impact into its artistic process. The work is literally

composed of thousands of individual testimonials and experiences, which attest to its collective meaning and importance. Inspired by this approach, this research highlighted ways in which audience responses can be creatively embedded within participatory processes, not to undermine the artist's vision but rather to extend it into an active dialogue with viewers. In this sense, instead of pursuing a purely objective or empirical framework for studying art and the public, the emphasis shifts to the intersubjective nature of the field, focusing on the relationships formed between different subjectivities. Accordingly, the performative dimension of public art allows for a more nuanced insight into its cultural value, in its emphasis on the interaction and engagement of participants with a work. Take the example of street graffiti: from the ubiquitous act of tagging to the more elaborate forms of murals. Across these, we may wonder which of these practices constitute actual art and, according to some, which should be seen as mere vandalism. Yet, this perspective is not concerned with the definition of art *per se* (a definition that is in fact first and foremost in the intention of the maker and should not be confused with whether the work was professionally commissioned as art or not); rather, the concern here is with the performative dimension it engenders with its public. A graffitied wall may in fact heighten our sense of our belonging to a public space, or in some cases preclude this, making us feel that we no longer share in it, making us uncomfortable in the surroundings. The question is not about what it means or whether it is good, but rather what it *does* – in a space, to a space, with the people that experience it. How do we measure this? Rather than the questionnaires and statistics, the approach described here highlights the importance of participatory engagement: participation that may not mean co-creation, but, more broadly, a meaningful encounter with the work that kindles its publicness. Such publicness, also not to be confused with popularity, is the level at which doing becomes activating, and activating an act of performance.

To this end, the practice of public art is not simply one of siting and contextualising a work in a given public space, but crucially of finding new ways to meaningfully interact with the public. The training and practice of this derives from creative experiments, from the more simple to the more complex and multi-layered, as illustrated in some examples below.

Take any object and place it in a public space, as an art intervention

This is one of my first tasks on the MA course, before students begin to explore more directly concepts such as counter-monumentality and participation. This task, which I have shared in multiple contexts, such as my laboratory *Public Art Experiment* for the British Council in Hong Kong (2021), always reveals powerful insights into what we understand as public space and how artistic practice may relate to this. The object may be anything, but I try to encourage choosing it according to some form of personal link or narrative.

Exercising care in placing it in a public space and curating its display are important practices for the student, emphasising the need to look for a relationality between object and setting. Significantly, the action of object-placing highlights art's rightful presence in public space beyond top-down commissioning. There is a deliberate intention here of subverting an understanding from modern art history, particularly in the Institutional Theory proposed by Danto (1964; 2014), that tends to see in the

institution the ultimate signifier of art's validity. Dissociating public art from its common perception as institutionally-endorsed work does not mean being against the latter understanding – indeed, institutions play a vital role in the field's development. Rather, it is about reminding ourselves that public art should, first and foremost, invite a democratic engagement with a given space that may itself challenge the status quo that frames this.

Students often comment that they are disappointed by the fact that passers-by may not notice or may deliberately ignore the exercise as it takes place. But really, that is one of its most important learnings. On the one hand, the task attunes the participant to noticing how the object placed in public space embodies new connotations in its new siting, how it changes *because of* public space; on the other hand, for public space to meaningfully change as a result of the object's presence in it, time is needed in developing a connection with the space, understanding its performative dimension: the need for activation often spontaneously arises in such tasks.

An example of this came from two students who took the course to expand their professional practice in Sri-Lankan classical dance forms and its application to public art contexts: placing a range of objects traditionally related to their dance forms (including a bell instrument, candles and an item of costume) in a chosen location in nearby Aldgate, they explored the juxtaposition of these in the given urban setting. The small scale of the objects, largely unnoticed by visitors to begin with, was then amplified by a simple choreographic intervention involving the rest of the cohort. The testing of this, beyond the artistic merit of the specific intervention, is crucial for students to identify degrees of activation, without imposing these upon the public: the subtle dialogues that may arise, somewhere between the work being noticed and actually interacted with, are a key factor here. Students in this case sustained the action for a given amount of time and implemented simple changes to test how the impact of their presence may be furthered. Placing the objects in more visible positions, enlarging the choreographic gestures and crucially engaging in conversations with passers-by as they increasingly wondered what they were doing, allowed students to achieve further and more meaningful interactions with their extemporaneous audience.

Importantly, in this task, students are encouraged to engage in direct observation of the public's response, even when this may be minimal, objectively recording the encounters achieved amongst the number of passers-by, akin to the practice of 'public art watch' proposed by Senie (2003). In doing so, they attempt to reframe their positionality from intervenors to impartial observers, in order to record their findings and critically reflect, back in class, on the relational dynamics between intervention and context, comparing their observations with others. This approach reflects the model of 'pedagogy in action' as proposed by Merlino and Stewart (2015), extending artistic reflexivity beyond self-discovery, into socially-oriented and situational concerns. Starting from such simple interventions, the learning journey for the students is punctuated by increasingly complex tasks, eventually leading to their major project at the end of course, which, for the first time, is a fully open brief.

Beyond the pedagogical use of tasks such as the one described here, I share this practice as a methodological vehicle for both professional artists working in the public sphere and, just as importantly, for those involved in the commissioning of new work. So many examples of public art are criticised for not achieving the level of "success", the measure for which is often not clearly identified, that justifies the investment

backing these. Senie points at the vicious circles in the commissioning of public art, whereby the visibility of public art is often marked by its controversy, which can paralyse a field in being subject to both the possible discontent of stakeholders, as well as an embedded distrust by the art-world institutions that should champion it (Senie, 2003). This tendency, which again should be distinguished from whether a given work is popular or not (great public art can divide an audience, but should always engage in dialogue), can, I would propose, be counteracted by a more multi-layered exploration of the context where public art may be sited: beyond simply surveying consensus and logistical feasibility, there is scope, as is also explored below, to involve artistic practice itself in preliminary stages, in order to find new, more nuanced ways, to assess the potential of a public art intervention and of its envisioned location.

People-watching

The idea of observing, listening to public space is in itself a creative stimulus: the simple activity of "people watching", as so popularly embedded in the way many public spaces are architecturally and socially conceived (one only needs to think of the typical configuration of seating around a square as example of this), is both essential in public art as a preparation for a new work and an interesting starting point for artistic exploration, which I have explored in connection with both my pedagogical approaches, as well as my artistic practice. In my video series *Choreographics of Square* (2023), I filmed static shots focussing on the movement and behaviour of people across three metropolitan squares as my chosen case studies: Trafalgar Square in London, Piazza San Marco in Venice and Federation Square in Melbourne. With each square being filmed from four different angles, the footage would later be converted into digital animations – this is both an aesthetic choice in post-production and an ethical consideration in keeping the depicted people anonymous and unrecognisable. As a result, each square is represented in four video channels, so that not only the different angles are juxtaposed and viewed in synchronicity, but the three squares may be also explored together at the same time, where the projections are exhibited side by side. The fact that each public square is filmed at a particular public festivity or occasion (half-term holidays in Trafalgar Square, Shrove Tuesday in Piazza San Marco and a weekend festival in Federation Square) contributes a celebratory dimension in these spaces and allows for all age ranges to be included.

In reflecting on the choreography of public space, this exploration focuses in on people's proxemics and kinetics as they move in the given locations, highlighting our viewing position in interpreting relationships and context. This approach builds on previous artistic projects of mine, such as *Museographic Animations* (2022), where a similar approach was used in collaboration with MUVE (Fondazione dei Musei Civici di Venezia), within which the idea of "choreography of agency" proposed by Diamantopoulou and Christidou (2016) in the context of the museum, is translated into digital artworks. Drawing on my reflections on these in a dedicated article (2023), I look at the layered composition deriving from the content depicted: the external constraints of public space act as a choreographic premise in their own right, determining how people move in such a setting; conversely, people's own idiosyncratic responses cause unexpected, improvisational elements that, framed by the camera and additionally superimposed with soundtrack, animation effects and the multi-channel format, provide

a composite outcome that can be appreciated in its multidimensional complexity.
In presenting the work, viewers often comment on how it captures not only the role of these public spaces in fostering a sense of communal celebration at the time the footage was recorded, but also the ways in which individuals respond to such occasions: taking part, passing through, or even ignoring the event altogether. While the festivity provides a sense of cohesion within the content, socioeconomic contrasts remain visible, suggesting that not everyone has equal access to the playfulness of the occasion. We see street cleaners in Piazza San Marco striving to keep the square intact amid the chaos of Carnevale; parents running after children who momentarily disappear into the crowd; and the different ways in which tourists and locals navigate the space and one another's presence. In this sense, each video component features a series of impromptu micro-narratives, highlighted by the format of presentation. It is always striking how, both compositionally and dramaturgically, each shot appears almost carefully staged, with actions that seem to respond meaningfully to the frame that contains them and to the duration in which they unfold. Yet it is, of course, also the viewer who contributes their own interpretation to the decoding of the images, adding another layer of signification to the process.
Beyond its function as an artwork, I have found *Choreographics of Square* to be a useful visual stimulus to implement in my research on the public sphere, as recently disseminated at the Symposium *Public Space Challenges* at Pratt Institute in New York (2024) and at the *Past, Present and Future of Public Space* conference in Bologna (2024). In both cases, the artwork was actively utilised to stimulate discussions on the importance of people-watching in understanding public space. As previously hinted at, it is common practice in the planning of public art to engage in often extended processes of consultation with stakeholders: while this is understandable in both moral and legal terms (Colquhoun, 2005), consultation may often fall into the traps of a box-ticking exercise and risks undermining the very point of public art, that is to reimagine public space, rather than simply looking for consensus on how to use this. I propose that if art practice is itself implemented in understanding public space, before and, indeed, regardless of whether a work is formally commissioned for it, it may shed new light on the potential for a space to be creatively activated. In this sense, seeking prior consensus may undervalue the expertise of the artist in envisioning new possibilities, assuming that such possibilities are already collectively understood by the stakeholders: implementing art to interrogate public space may represent a valuable way to consider new strategies in public art commissioning.
Of course, it must be emphasised that public art commissioning cannot be treated as a singular, uniform process: each context brings its own logistical constraints, social needs, curatorial priorities, institutional imperatives and bureaucratic challenges – indeed, no two contexts are ever the same. That said, I propose that applying these deliberately broad creative principles offers a valuable way to expand artistic possibilities and explore new modalities of engagement.



Figure 2. Still from 'Choreographics of Square', 2023.

The Speculative Dimension

As evidenced in these previous examples, one of the key principles of this approach is to invest into conceptual creative experiments and hypothetical reimaginings of public space. This is also reflected in the pedagogical framing of the MA Public Art & Performative Practices. In the first nine months of a twelve-months programme, the work that the students produce is mainly focused on speculative projects, whereby pitches are made to real stakeholders (our partnering institutions), who in turn provide actual industry feedback, to complement the more specific assessment that is made by the academic team, following the stipulated criteria of each assignment. The separation between industry and academic assessment is deliberate, as it gives students the opportunity to receive two types of feedback, without these compromising each other's scope and without confusing the professional and the pedagogical emphases of the programme, albeit inextricably linked to one another. It is rare that the two types of feedback may clash, but it is essential for the pedagogical ethos of the course that the individual educational journey of the student is acknowledged, not just the outcome presented; in turn, it is equally important for students to gain experience in being evaluated solely on outcome, from the point of view of our industry partners.

I see the creation of speculative projects, beyond logistical advantages, as a fundamental methodological vehicle for public art, in that it allows the practitioner, student or professional, to elaborate ambitious ideas that can be tailored to progressively more defined constraints. In the context of urban exploration, echoing Edwards and Pettersen (2023), "speculation can challenge and transform the linear, dualistic understandings of the city, and shape and redirect innovation practices" (p.1). In doing so, speculative designs encourage ways of working beyond the limitations of what is perceived as 'feasible', whilst progressively aligning with the real needs of the site in question.

Thinking beyond budget and logistical limitations, especially at the start of a course, but, I would argue, also at regular intervals in one's professional career, enables the origination of unfiltered creative hypotheses. In truth, working at such broad level of speculation may often feel more daunting than liberating, but that is also part of the learning process: the realisation that, when faced with actual constraints, these may be reframed as creative stimuli, rather than creative restrictions. Nothing is wasted in public art development: any idea produced may be included in an artist's portfolio, whether physically realised or only conceptually. Indeed, several art projects, such as The High Line's *New Monuments for New Cities* (2019) or Vitrine Gallery's *Monuments on Paper* (2022-2023) have championed the speculative dimension as artistic register to encourage new thinking in (anti)monumental creation. Similarly, Do Ho Suh's *Bridge Project* (1999-ongoing) envisions an apparently impossible task of creating bridges between Seoul, NYC and London. The speculative dimension is key to understanding this project: beyond its feasibility, it is this that embodies the artistic register of the work, poetically exploring logistical, environmental and sociopolitical challenges in the construction of a "perfect home". It is the concept in all these cases, rather than its physical realisation and commission, that is emphasised as work of public art.

This reinforces the aforementioned fact that public art should not automatically be understood as institutionally commissioned and physically realised practice, though the latter is often a prominent association we make with this discipline. Going back to the simple task of placing an object in a public space as an art intervention, it is precisely because we work in the public sphere that we have the right to be creatively present in this without institutional endorsement: an understanding that may of course be used as both practical tool and ideological framing.

Conversely, an emphasis on the speculative exploration in public art may also be used to advocate a policy change in commissioning strategies, whereby part of a budget may be reserved for exploratory work initiating different artists' responses and showcasing these alongside the finalised chosen commission: an approach that is still surprisingly under-utilised and that I have regularly advocated in sector-specific symposia, in order to democratise the process of commissioning itself. To be clear, such approach is different from simply providing some budget towards the development of shortlisted ideas: it is about curatorially highlighting the speculative dimension in a public art process, evidencing the plural voices that have contributed to it, whether fully commissioned or not.

Orchestrating situations

The speculative dimension of public art emphasises a conceptual framing to this practice, which contributes a creative shift from the object of display to the relational dimension fostered by a given work. I used this principle in many of my own artistic projects and often termed my contributions to existent programmes as "conceptual residencies". The previously mentioned collaboration with MUVE institutions in Venice was proposed under this phrase and the latter included the aforementioned series of hypothetical performance interventions, later presented in a dedicated publication (Scarso, 2023), though, accordingly, never physically realised *in situ*.

One of the significant learnings from this approach is that the very stimulus of the creative process lies in the situation one is attempting to create in a given context, as

opposed to the material *thing* that may be designed for that situation to take place. As an artist, I have always found myself resisting the question "what am I trying to say?" when developing a new work: it stifles imagination and reduces the creative process to one of logically-centred communication. Indeed, if one could easily "say it", what would be the point in making art to convey it, and not say it in the first place? Conversely, I have found myself asking questions like "what situation am I trying to create?" and "what do I want the public to experience"?

Orchestrating situations, I have come to realise, is the fundamental premise of public art. The term 'orchestrating' may sound ambiguous, possibly connoting the idea of trying to manipulate people's behaviour according to a given agenda: the way I see this, however, entails the enabling of performative engagements, stimulated by the creative intervention designed. Much like an orchestra in a music concert, the public is seen as active participant in the work, without which the work cannot fully take place. Indeed, 'situation' is a loaded term too, in art history: its specific reference in the Situationist International (SI) movement from the late 1950s to the early 1970s gave this word a political implication, in its critique of the "spectacle" articulated by Debord (1967) as the capitalist model of cultural commodification. It is significant that such a perspective has seen a revival in later curatorial theories such as Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) and Bishop's studies on participatory art (2012, 2016).

Focusing on situations challenges the stereotypical claim for permanence in public art, by highlighting the ephemerality of this practice. Even in the context of fixed sculptures outdoors, the aforementioned most common association we may make with this practice, it is the situation that is engendered, rather than the monumental fixity of the object on display, that is the crux of the work, without the expectation of ideological perpetuity. As Hein proposes:

> (…) impermanence is a quality that violates the ideals of traditional Western art but has become an eloquent feature of the new public art. Many works are temporary or even ephemeral, thereby escaping the neglect due to habituation that befalls more permanent public art. (Hein, 2006, p. 91)

In this sense, creating public art may be seen as akin to the practice of creating performance scores: each work, whatever the medium, encourages a performative engagement, a "conceptual scaffolding" (Helguera*, In Terms of Performance* website) for an action by the public: to look, to sense, to circumnavigate, to touch, to interact, to act in response may all be seen as performance gestures that the work engenders. Whilst this property can be seen as inherent to any artwork, contemporary public art, I propose, should explore this more consciously, engaging the viewers directly and, in doing so, intentionally emphasising its performative potential through its situational dimension, as previously cited by Von Hantelman (2014).

As evidence of this in relation to pedagogy, students on the MA Public Art & Performative Practices worked on several collaborations with City of London Corporation and Aldgate BID. In 2023, as part of London Festival of Architecture, they were commissioned to create activations on an installation designed by artist Chao Chao, located in front of Toynbee Hall. In a programme entitled *On Tenterground*, the students envisaged a variety of live interventions, ranging from workshops to performances and video projections. Key in this process was the idea of inhabiting the

designed structure, so as to make this a temporary hub for the local community. Such structure accommodated the work, rather than existing independently of the activations: it was the orchestration of communal situations, fostered by the students' activities, that enabled its artistic message. Of course, this was not an easy process. Aldgate is an area of stark socioeconomic contrasts, home to a vibrant, multicultural community alongside corporate offices bustling with thousands of workers who are present only Monday to Friday. Throughout the project, students had to develop new strategies to engage these diverse audiences – whether by focusing on lunchtime and after-school periods or by adapting language to make the project more accessible. We even encountered antisocial behaviour at our closing event. While unpleasant, this latter incident underscored the fact that there is no single, cohesive "public", and that the value of a project like this lies in its capacity to respond and adapt to the circumstances at hand.



Figure 3. 'On Tenterground', MA Public Art and Performative Practices. London Metropolitan University.

Focusing on orchestration does not mean claiming to predict people's responses, nor should this attempt to do so, as this would inherently undervalue the point of

interaction. Rather, it highlights the live(d) experience of public art and, more broadly, public space: the ephemeral dimension that can be fostered but never controlled, as it always involves the crucial intervention of the public in order to achieve its significance.

Enabling new Practice

While writing this article, I am currently working on a new project –a collaboration with a major heritage site that itself was borne out of an initial educational partnership with the Masters programme. For this project, upcycling materials from the site itself, the aim is to create a public art sculpture activated via recorded sound: from sound art to spoken word and music compositions. The public will be invited to get close to key points in the structure, from which different sound channels will be heard. An important aspect of this idea is that, beyond the artwork itself in the form of the sculptural structure being designed, it enables in the future new sound interventions to take place through a range of collaborations: commissioned artists, students, schools and community organisations.

Consciously referencing the London's Fourth Plinth model of understanding a public art site as a rotating programme of interventions (Mayor of London website, accessed 18/03/2025), rather than a permanent artwork, the project aims to democratise the idea of public art, by establishing different layers in the creative process: the initial realisation of the primary structure with an aesthetic reference to the site's architecture, and the subsequent responses by future artists and partners, activating the primary structure through sound projects.

This takes me to a key point in the way I would hope public art programming may continue to evolve in the future, challenging the monolithic presence of permanent objects based on individual commissioning: if the very point of public art is that of opening access to the experience of art, it seems logical that such access should be expanded not only for the viewer, but also for the maker. This reprises Hein's proposition that 'new public art':

> …enlists public engagement at every emergent point, seeking renewal throughout the creative process and the life of the work. It professes not to exist independently of that interaction. Effacing the (singular) artist whose finished creation is to be apprehended by other self-contained individuals, this art merges the creative act with its never-completed interpretation and reception. (Hein, 2006, p. 159)

It is precisely by rotating programmes and by enabling a range of interventions in the same site, that, I propose, we can challenge an individualistic approach to this practice, so as not to limit this to the act of a singular gesture that dominates, indeed colonises, a public space for good. I am of course not proposing that all permanent sculptures should be seen as a thing of the past, but rather that by implementing a rotational approach as much as possible, we can strive to make public art increasingly equitable and inclusive and ensure that public spaces may be as dynamic as possible in their affordances.

Conversely, inclusion should be the aim when it comes to the public too. Indeed, contemporary public programming approaches are increasingly incorporating the public into their initiatives: as we have seen, from consultation to participation and co-creation. This route is of course not always a straightforward one and may pose an

intrinsic dilemma in public art: as previously mentioned, to what extent should we consult the public in the creation of new work and to what extent should we instead trust in an artist's vision and their risk-taking endeavours?
In the previously mentioned research on Artichoke (2022), I explored this unique conundrum: its CEO, Helen Marriage, raised an important point about the progressive tendency for public art programming to emphasise the role of co-creation, which she questions may inadvertently undermine the artist's unique insight and expertise. A balanced strategy appears to be key, therefore: one that validates the artist and the stakeholders, without compromising either. And because the nature of art is, once again, not about consensus necessarily, a rotational approach in public programming, integrated with the speculative emphasis proposed earlier, may provide a solution here: the focus should shift from looking for one voice to appease all, to allowing a multi-vocal approach, where more creative inputs are enabled.

Public Space Performs

The practice of carefully observing and creatively reimagining public spaces contributes an understanding that public space *is* performance, it *performs*. It does so, on a sociological level, because it embeds social conventions in the behavioural patterns of its users that can be seen as performative, and, on an artistic level, because it can be interpreted, as a result, as an aesthetic and sensorial realm of performance. The examples cited in this article, from training strategies to professional works and public commissioning approaches, evidence the importance of implementing this principle across different phases of artistic development, reinforcing the idea that public art is not there to simply fill or decorate a space, but to activate it in its performative dialogue with the public. The role of education is key here: for artists, to ensure that they are fully aware of the implications of creating artworks for the public sphere, beyond simply siting work outdoors; for researchers and curators, to establish an academic context to the complexities of this field; and for organisations, to value the unique expertise that new professionals in this field may bring to their programming.
While this approach views public art beyond mere "urban decoration", it is important, however, to be mindful of the nature and of the limitations of the artistic process in the public realm, in order to preserve its integrity and function. As Senie reminds us (2003), "public art is not a substitute for urban renewal or social work, although projects may address or include such functions" (page not specified). Senie argues that such expectation is often unreasonably placed on this practice, rather than dealing with the deeper problems from which such issues may derive. In this sense, we need to remind ourselves that art is not there to necessarily provide solutions (unlike, say, urban design), but to contribute new experiences, raise questions and provoke thought. Nor can or should art necessarily please everyone: art history demonstrates quite clearly that the most ground-breaking art will regularly divide opinions. Yet, if an ambitious public art programme cannot be created purely out of consensus, this should nonetheless not undermine the importance of dialogue with and relevance to those who use the public space in which it takes place.
In addressing these epistemological questions, whether these can be fully answered or not, we shift the focus, as previously mentioned, from what public space is to what it *does*: how it enables human dialogue, experiences and cultural and creative expressions.

If public art is not there to necessarily provide pragmatic solutions, it however has the potential for reacquainting ourselves with the human right to public space access and to the human need to congregate beyond the private dimension. In doing so, art may be uniquely placed to remind us of the important role that we ourselves perform in the public sphere: there is no public space without public; there is no public without individuals coming together.

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