

Performative Resilience: Artistic Activism in Urban Spaces of Athens

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Abstract

Multiple constraints and passivity in urban space on a global scale, combined with the transformation of economic crises into spatial crises, have often led to a rise in civic participation as a form of radical response to contested social frameworks. In a number of cases, as these frameworks faced collapse, citizens have been led to bottom-up solutions which test their capacity to shape socio-spatial programs and disrupt the formality of space freeing it from constraints. Resilient cities – defined as cities that have the ability to absorb, recover and prepare for future shocks – are often at the epicenter of such multi-layered transformations. This paper explores some of the practices deployed by cultural practitioners (performers, visual artists, activists, architects etc.) in Athens, Greece as a response to conditions of austerity and political turmoil, as well as methods which could be deployed towards the re-appropriation of public space within oppressive socio-economic and political contexts through empirical research. For the purpose of this analysis, ‘performance’ refers to a number of temporal kinesthetic actions of resilience that attempt to critique and interrogate socio-political narratives in public space. Through daily performative actions, groups of citizens attempt to rethink public space in order to confront newly urgent social needs and normalised behaviors. Cultural practitioners and urban activists, initiate performative actions as an attempt to demonstrate their resilience and capacity to adapt to austerity and crisis, pushing the boundaries of what public space can accommodate, examining complex social transformations in spatial terms.

Keywords: Public space, Citizen-led, Performance, Cultural practice, Crisis, Austerity, Urban activism

1. Introduction

Resilient cities are cities that have the ability to absorb, recover and prepare for future shocks – economic, environmental, social and institutional (OECD). Often, such shocks bring change that can both be seen and felt, affecting spaces of the city and their users. In times of crisis and austerity in particular, the use and ownership of urban space becomes contested. The emerging question of whom those spaces belong to has defined “urban history as a process of struggle” (Rogers, 2012, p.4). This paper draws attention to the political, economic and social drivers that led to the increased presence of cultural

practitioners (through civil society, NGOs, citizen-led groups) in public spaces of Athens, Greece from the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008. It is inevitable that, in countries affected by recession, major cities are the central point of its manifestation, the locus of various forms of consequences and where these are most persistent. The present investigation has been triggered by the observation of a series of events that have taken place in Athens throughout these years. By witnessing and discovering a multiplying number of cultural practitioners who have used public space as a testing ground, the need to study this ongoing phenomenon and to question its origin, its impact and its consequences was identified, drawing from theories that describe the city as a place of political configurations and a base for the

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emancipated actions of socially engaged citizens. The role of civic actions in the city has mostly been encountered in theories of urbanism. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), urbanist and activist Jane Jacobs critiques the prevailing urban planning trends that were adopted by American cities in the 1950s. She emphasises the importance of public life and how it translates into spatial infrastructure. Jacobs viewed the city as an outcome of short-lived, small-scale, spontaneous civic actions. In the present analysis, and in the context of resistance to austerity, such actions could be examined as actions of ‘performative resilience’.

2. Literature Review

Until the early 2000s, the cultural scene of Athens consisted of theatres, music venues and galleries that were located in distinct areas of the city centre, and mainly hosted traditional art forms and followed specific agendas. Gradually, a series of practitioners and groups emerged on the periphery of that system, introducing new experimental work through festivals and alternative art spaces. Unable to access established cultural venues, artists began situating their work in unexpected locations more frequently, creating alternative modes of practice by figuring out new methods of funding, promoting and staging their work in ad-hoc venues. The unpredictable locations selected affected their relationship with the audience and the aesthetics of their works. This led to the emergence of a new cultural landscape and a social turn in contemporary art and performance that involved a mode of work consisting of immersive, temporary experiences that left traces, as urban interventions. This shift opened up a dialogue regarding the critical situatedness in relation to the manifested socio-political identity of a location in the urban context. As there are often no limits on who the audience is in public space, performance soon functioned as a type of socio-political re-action. According to dance scholar Randy Martin, politics and corporeal movement are processes that make and occupy space (1985), while French

philosopher Jacques Rancière points out that arts and politics do not belong to separate fields. He also re-theorizes community as a polemical distribution of modes of being and “occupations” in a space of possibilities (Rancière, 2010, p. 148-149). These concepts were highly reflected in the socio-political conditions and upheaval that was intensified in Greece between 2009 and 2017 (timeline of observations).

The uses and politics of public space soon became contested and at the same time, new private institutions emerged to fill in the gaps (Argyropoulou, 2015). In 2012, artist and writer Rachel Cloughton wrote that “despite the crisis – or perhaps because of it – the art scene in Athens is flourishing” (Cloughton, 2012). She highlighted the fact that “the city is seeing a turn towards touring exhibitions and ephemeral performances, events and public discussions more suited to the tough economic climate than commercially driven work”. At the time, the cultural scene in Athens contained more than fifty non-profit and self-organised art collectives, the majority of which occupied spaces in the city on an ad hoc basis (Cloughton, 2012). Social and political phenomena and frequent disruptions during the past decade had changed the functions of the city, while the combination of long-term crisis and the consequences of social decay had led to urban confusion. Initially, people surrendered to this condition and limited their presence and circulation around formerly vibrant parts of the city. The lack of cultural fulfilment became passively accepted, while it appeared that the city was deteriorating along with the systems and functions that organised it. The economic crisis was transformed into a spatial crisis through channels such as the property market, housing foreclosures and financial debacle of urban areas (Skayannis, 2013; Cohen, 2011). Since the Movement of the Squares in 2011 and the recurring riots, the center of Athens became a manifestation of existing dichotomies that gradually deepened. The citizens’ right to their city was expressed through actions of

defense but also through the occupation of public spaces – mainly central squares of Athens (the area of Exarhia, the former Elliniko Airport, Navarinou Park, Pedion tou Areos Park, Syntagma Square, Omonia Square, etc.). Along with these actions came a general sense of awakening and cultural empowerment. This was attempted through open-air events, including collective kitchens and performances. As Greek civil society proved to be dysfunctional, and had limited autonomy in relation to the state and political parties, in contrast to this, social movements, collective actions and alternative spaces emerged as a response to this condition.

2.1. The effects of post-austerity policy on the cultural sector

Attempting to operate despite the severe funding cuts that were forced by austerity policies as a result of the first (2010), second (2012) and third (2015) Memoranda, the range of informal solutions that emerged and their impact on public space have a central role throughout this paper. The arts – and culture in general – suffered severely as the Greek Ministry of Culture compromised its responsibilities by engaging with matters that related to tourism and education instead. This magnified the already existing problems that had prevailed for years: the disintegration of the Archaeological Institute, the unavoidable merging of different administrative bodies, the diminished budgets, lack of funding and political turmoil. This resulted in a general reduction in staff in various Ministry services, but mainly it meant multiple padlocked museum halls and archaeological sites throughout the country. Under these extreme conditions, culture has been underprivileged.

Changes in the cultural sector in Greece were intensified in 2011 when all governmental support for the performing arts stopped abruptly. One of the unforeseen changes that emerged during the crisis, and predominantly after 2013, was the thriving of the performing arts. Despite of the extensive budget reductions

that were expected to drastically affect artistic activity, cultural practitioners managed to challenge these conditions and seek other ways to showcase their work. Greek performer and dance scholar Natalie Zervou explains that, on many occasions, they utilized abandoned buildings in central locations of the city turning them into venues to stage their productions in front of an audience (2017). The crisis thus provided an opportunity to foster alternative approaches of cultural production and it urged artists to critically reflect on issues that concerned the socio-political environment. Choreographers and performers became increasingly engaged with producing work that came into a dialogue with the political developments, either as a direct response or as a critique. “This turn towards more political and politicized art also coincided with a transformation in the Greek cultural landscape that had been already emerging since the early 2000s” (Zervou, 2017).

By 2015, the cultural sector in Greece had its share of shifts and misfortunes. The theatres, museums, galleries, cinemas, music halls, bookshops, as well as the Ministry of Culture itself and the famous Athens and Epidaurus Festival, were some of the institutions influenced by the crisis. However, it seems that the consequences were not just unfortunate, but in many cases encouraged a completely new mode of thinking and a profound extroversion. Beyond the arts on the other hand, the consequences for the public spaces of the city of Athens itself had been catastrophic. The multiple destructions it had faced since 2008 eventually meant that the heart of the city was deserted. And yet, despite these events, a number of groups, collectives and private initiatives had emerged and were

drawing attention to the increasingly problematic relationship between the citizens and public space.

3. Methodology

The methodological approach for this research involved sensory ethnography that enabled the observation, analysis and interpretation of a series of temporal events. Additional information has been gathered from local bodies, community engagement groups and their archives as well as individual artists, activists and scholars. A selective documentation of performative events in Athens was identified following qualitative research and personal experience in the city. The selection has been made according to a) urban strategic significance, b) personal/experiential involvement, c) political subversion, d) focus of artistic/activist attention. The outcome of this study serves the purpose of understanding how groups of citizens and their temporal actions affect and are affected by the specificities of their spatial context. As many of these groups and their actions disappear over time and suffer from a lack of long-term continuity new ones often emerge and the demand multiplies exponentially, supported by the citizens' participation and reactions as well as the ongoing social conditions. Personal familiarity and involvement with specific groups and organizations in the context of workshops and symposiums prior to this research was a point of departure.

As the methodology of this research involved re-visiting central squares of Athens on multiple occasions during its course, it obtained insights and observations. Therefore, the research was enriched by a series of events: the financial crisis and its effects on public space, the observation of activist reaction, the re-activation of the Embros theatre, the redesign of Omonia Square in Athens, the pandemic that brought unprecedented restrictions on movement. At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that COVID-19 itself is not framed solely as a restriction but rather as an event which has

the capacity to redirect the performance through interruption, unexpected events and new encounters it facilitated on an urban scale.

4. Results

At this point it is critical to highlight that performance and cultural initiatives emerged as a form of radical response to a contested social reality. The term "performance" can be used here to describe a number of temporal kinaesthetic actions that critiqued and interrogated socio-political narratives in space. This definition is unpacked, considering the extent to which performances have influenced public space, investigating the hypothesis that the human body could be seen as a spatial agent through which temporal conditions in public space can occur. It also becomes interesting – from an urban studies standpoint – to examine how the performative interventions that have gathered momentum in recent years, can be seen as a method of negotiation and temporary spatial occupation. In the case of Athens, the intention to claim public space as a performance space was also a response to the fragmentation of socio-economic methods, which relates to the current consumption of cultural production. It is inevitable that at times of "crisis", cultural practitioners' motives change as they seek to explore and stretch boundaries by becoming politically vigilant. Public space in Athens was primarily the backdrop for such interventions, as it seems to provide a wide range of possibilities and a level of tolerance for multiple forms of civic engagement: recreation, communication, criticism, and protest.

According to feminist writer and social activist bell hooks, "spaces can be interrupted, appropriated and transformed through artistic and literary practice" (1990, p. 153). In performance – whether spontaneous or planned – where the body acts as a medium in space, the dialogue that occurs with the surrounding environment is significant. In the essay *The Dimensions of Performance*, Jonah Westerman argues that performance is not a medium or a

description of an artwork but a series of questions about the relationship between art and society. He points out that what is needed is a way to reclaim this and specify how such works facilitate the mediation of social relations. The concept that artistic practices can be seen as “interruptions” in space places more emphasis on their temporal nature (Westerman, 2016). This seems very relevant to the case studies that are examined later, as for many of them the motive was not the final outcome of the performance, but the act of interrupting the “normality” of the particular locations.

It is intriguing to go further in defining the term, as there are a variety of different approaches to theorising performance and performativity from a range of scholars and practitioners from different disciplines. At this point, it is significant to mention two principal theorists from fields outside performance who have encouraged the appropriation of these terms: the sociologist and social psychologist, Erving Goffman (1959) and philosopher and gender theorist who coined gender performativity, Judith Butler (1990). In *Redefining Urban Space Through Performance*, performance practice and urban space scholar Charikleia Marini (2013) notes that when analyzing social phenomena, Goffman used the term “performance” in its “fundamental meaning as a set of actions carried out by an individual with a specified duration, which takes place in front of others – the observers”. She further suggests that “performances outside designated performance spaces are able to bring into focus spaces within the city and make the audience – who are typically the inhabitants of the city – aware of the urban surroundings as well as the practices that appear in them” (p.9). Such metaphorical ways of defining performativity allow us to think of the performativity of space as an unpredictable and unfixed parameter that is constantly subjected to the possibility of change. According to these theories, space becomes triggered through performance; the performance of people who interact

with space and the performance of the built environment itself within the materiality and spatiality of the resilient city. Since the notion of performativity implies agency and subjectivity, “the possibilities for personal action and involvement are embedded in the production of space” (Marini, 2013). Thrift and Dewsbury claim that “performance allows us to treat space as an active operator, rather than a passive sign standing for something else” (2000, p. 427).

4.1. Unconventional spaces of performance - Co-presence, body limits, memory

This section begins by acknowledging the qualities, conditions and constitutive parts of a spatial context which may lend themselves to performativity. Site-specific performance in public space is a particularly widespread approach in Athens. First, it is encouraged by the city’s historical, natural, rural and urban landscape, but it is also a result of the favorable climatic conditions that enable outdoor activities. Citizens reacted to the imposed austerity measures and organized several protests and occupations, coming up with new processes of “embodied democratic participation”. A tendency towards the utilization of self-organized and self-managed spaces that mainly hosted political and politicized performances was identified at the intersection of collaborative approaches and site-specificity. The performances presented in this context often introduced an activist approach. An example of a self-managed space is EMIPOΣ Theatre¹. On 11 November 2011, and while Greece was temporarily without a government, a group of artists that formed Mavili Collective (Mavili Collective, n.d.) occupied the disused Embros Theatre building that had been abandoned since 2007. The Mavili Collective came together in the summer of 2010 as a spontaneously formed artistic group and produced a series of cultural actions that questioned the institution of the local cultural industry, calling for collective

¹ Embros translates as ‘Onwards’ Theatre.

participation. After organizing the sending of a public letter to the Minister of Culture, a conference, a city-wide performance project and a series of texts on cultural policies, the Mavili Collective initiated the Embros theatre program as a practical cultural proposal and as direct action. The Embros Theatre occupancy installed itself as a “reactivation”. Embros sought not only to occupy space but also to re-activate long abandoned cultural circuits – to reconstitute a disused theatre in the center of the city in order to question cultural practice in Greece and produce a temporary collective imagining of what a theatre today could be and do. The Embros site was chosen for its resonance within the arts community.

Before the financial crisis, the drivers for performance were mainly based on artistic motives of individual creators, rather than triggered by shared concerns and social issues. As a result, along with unconventional spaces of performance came a newfound sense of intimacy which, according to Natalie Zervou “when combined with the lack of staging, highlighted the significance of the moving bodies, their narratives, and the corporeal communication of those narratives”. Zervou refers to the artistic practices that emerged in Greece during the time of austerity using the term “precarious aesthetic”, where precarity is used to describe the condition of uncertainty projected from a neoliberal economic framework (Zervou, 2017). Despite the fact that the crisis was an outcome caused by financial circumstances, it extended beyond these origins and became a social crisis of spontaneous and informal solutions. Performance often took place in unconventional spaces such as squares, empty basements transformed into theatre spaces, the old stock market building that had hosted the Athens Biennale in 2013, empty plots of land.

In the book *Insurgent Public Space*, Jeffrey Hou (2014) addresses Laguerre’s (1994) ‘urban informality’ as a site of power. He claims that instances of self-made urban spaces, reclaimed and appropriated sites and temporary events, as well as informal

gathering places produced predominantly by marginalised communities and excluded individuals, have provided new expressions for the collective realms in the contemporary city. These insurgent public spaces challenge the conventional notion of what we consider public, but also address the traditional making of space (Hou, 2014). Undoubtedly, urban spaces such as squares, markets, streets and urban parks have been the centres of civic society. They provide opportunities for gathering, developing social relations, recreation and entertainment, as well as protests and demonstrations. Henaff and Strong also note that public space “designates an ensemble of social connections, political institutions, and judicial practices” (2001).

5. Discussion

In which specific moment does an everyday movement become political? The first parameter that can differentiate “normal” from “political” would be the duration of the particular action. Hence, how long does it take for an ordinary gesture in public space to be converted into an “unusual” one? Here, the matter of temporality is introduced, in the process of examining how a temporary event can lead to an alternative use of public space, defined by the length of time it has been used for. In the hypothetical case where a political protest could be read as choreography, what would the role of the participants in the scene be, and how does movement occur and contribute to the assignment of functions to a public space?

During and after a series of significant political events and a period of frequent protest and reaction (2008-2015), a profound intervention of citizen-led initiatives attempted to both interrupt the gradual malfunction of public space and address and replace basic needs. Carol Becker notes that “a number of artists have used their interventions of public/ private to take on a new role and a new line of interrogation appropriate to this historical moment [...] because they discern that what is missing now is public discourse about the relationship of individuals to society”

(2012, p. 67). The increase of ephemeral acts without state support was reflected in the space outside institutions and dominant powers. Instances of collective action occurred while the relationship between artistic and the political remained unresolved. Such instances experiment with the production of public space, participation, curatorial methods and ephemeral practices. Experimentation proved to be valuable mainly because it confronted the limits and formulated boundaries of social and collective action, personal limits and bodily limits. According to Greek performance artist and curator Gigi Argyropoulou, “the city plan is always incomplete. Our daily routes redesign our surroundings as our personal geographies are recorded in the city’s built environment, creating a type of immaterial architecture” (2015).

The literature review defined performance and its relation to politics, space and the city. It also evidenced the extent to which the financial crisis and austerity measures contributed towards the severe cuts in funding for the cultural sector. It also discussed how this, in turn, encouraged a rise in outdoor performance and alternative modes of cultural production, the profound mobilisation and response of groups of citizens participating in performative events, the role of the city itself and its public spaces as a field of both experimentation and the manifestation of political dialogue.

6. Conclusion

In Athens, citizens engaged in participation, decision-making and reclamation, in an attempt to reform, form and deform public space. In the field of cultural practices during the last twenty years, the social turn in contemporary art and performance has marked the emergence of a mode of working that involves immersive experiences and urban interventions. This has opened up questions

regarding the critical situatedness between content and form in relation to the political specificities of a location. In some cases, works voice a radical critique and in others they direct movement. This results in a collective rethinking of the city, its improvised social spaces and spaces of resistance. Cultural production in urban space has been found in the form of street art, critique, occupation, ephemeral acts, reflection and direct involvement in social movements that all contribute to the citizens’ performative resilience.

It therefore becomes necessary to address the vulnerability of public space to possible ‘threats’ and their consequences on its social nature. In this respect, the perseverance of performative resilience as an urban behaviour and the potential for it to obtain more permanent spatial presence could suggest its insertion in architectural, political and sociological methodologies. As crisis, austerity and their implications have not affected Athens in isolation but have imposed consequences in urban contexts on a global scale, the association of citizens’ movement in urban space and cultural expression can be observed in multiple spatial contexts. For example, the restrictions on movement, access and time that were imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic could be seen as a continuation of the profound urban conditions that Athens had experienced in previous years. Such restrictions on free movement – unimaginable for the vast majority of the population – had a direct impact on the space of the city and those it belongs to. However, a restriction has the capacity to redirect the “performance” through ruptures, interruptions of normality, unexpected events and encounters. In this different crisis too, movement – or the lack of it – was at the epicentre and we may therefore conclude that it is a necessary means for any act of performative resilience to occur.

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