

PUBLIC SPACE DRAMATURGY
*An essay on dramaturgical elements emerged
during a workshop with Danae Theodoridou*

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The entrance in social encounter

This essay delves into the interplay between the dramaturgy of public spaces and the meanings of the public body, reflecting on insights and outcomes of the workshop Public Space Dramaturgy, held from 22 to 26 of April 2024 by CIFAS and La Bellone, Brussels, given by performance maker and researcher Danae Theodoridou. La Bellone, a renowned cultural center dedicated to the performing arts, and CIFAS (Centre International de Formation en Arts du Spectacle) served as the vibrant backdrops for the exploration of dramaturgies and public space dynamics, in order to reconstruct space and time, to co-learn, co-think and create through performance. In this essay – which draws both on bibliography used in the workshop, as well as on specific processes and tasks proposed and tested in it by Theodoridou – I will report and analyze the outcomes of this workshop embodying two roles: that of the reflective observer and that of the participant, which were the roles I had in the workshop.

With the presence of almost a dozen people engaged in dramaturgy, performing arts and artistic research, the workshop began with a score-based task asking participants to take their time to stand in space and observe what was there. Gradually and one by one, they were invited to organize the objects that were already in the room as a process of composing and co-constructing the space wherein they later would interact with each other. That activity was followed by noticing what was missing and what needed to be rearranged, realizing the necessary changes for the bodies to then discover their own comfortable place, position themselves in the space that was just created, and performatively share orally with each other (in one or two sentences) anything that would help the rest of the group to get to know them better. This simple yet insightful exercise also transformed into the metaphor of the social choreography and the act of coming together in a practice of democracy, acknowledging who ‘we’ is and where we are when we are together, by respecting, observing and deciding in common what kind of image and space the group would occupy as an organism with the ability to organize themselves within their shared space and time.

Transindividual social imaginaries

The beginning of this workshop introduced the work of Danae Theodoridou on social imaginaries and the creation of performative processes on the practices of democracy. The practice of democracy transforms the individuals into a collective body that interacts and interchanges in the here and now. The appearances of the individuals formed in a maintained public space, co-thinking and co-relating with each other, render those individuals able to practice transindividual activities. In their book on social dramaturgy “Towards a Transindividual Self” (2022), the performance researchers and dramaturgs Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanović define transindividuality as a concept that extends beyond the individual to encompass the collective, social, and relational dimensions of human existence.

This notion emphasizes how individual identities and actions are shaped by and contribute to broader sociopolitical structures and collective experiences. Equally crucial for understanding how performance reflects, shapes, and challenges the collective understandings of society, is the notion of social imaginaries given that it highlights the role of the arts in both mirroring and molding the social realities and aspirations of a community. Entering the social encounter, the bodies appear interconnected with the space they meet in, whereas the space also takes shape according to the acts of those bodies. Is it through this close interconnection that space and bodies become public? Can a space be defined as public, if there are no performative acts of bodies that fulfill its existence? One could argue that in the micro-context of the specific workshop, our bodies became public by establishing the special material parameters and the principles to investigate in the dramaturgy of public space and time.

The publicness of space and body

Performance theorist Rebecca Schneider, in her research article "Appearing to others as others appear: Thoughts on performance, the polis, and public space" (2018), describes politics as an inherently performative activity, closely linked to how bodies present themselves to others in public spaces. She explains that politics are about "appearing to others as others appear to me." This idea highlights the essential connection between transindividuality, performance and politics. Rebecca Schneider's exploration of the relationship between politics and public space highlights the performative nature of political engagement, emphasizing the necessity of a space where individuals can explicitly appear to one another in their mutual vulnerability. This perspective highlights the importance of embodied, visible action in political life. However, it also raises questions about inclusivity, as the reliance on appearance may exclude those who do not fit conventional appearances or do not have the right to appear publicly. Schneider's analysis invites us to rethink public spaces as fluid, performative arenas essential for political interaction and mutual recognition.

On the participants' attempt to analyze publicness and reconstruct what are the ontological meanings of public space, the body and their vulnerability, Theodoridou proposed to realize an exercise where each one of the participants would stand in space in front of the group for ten seconds. Observing the (hidden) physical tension of the body as participants were called to "expose" and silently present themselves, as well as the way that they are being observed, had immediate reflection on the vulnerable states of a body, either it comes organically, with comfort or unrest. This exercise triggered an empathic state of our beings, as everyone experienced both positions and could identify with observing or being observed. For most participants, the action that made them experience their publicness was the gaze of others.

This exercise revealed the profound impact of the gaze, on the way we consider the other, a person, a matter, a phenomenon, and consequently, on our sense of publicness. It is highlighting how the presence and observation of others can evoke both vulnerability and empathy. The act of standing before the group, exposed to their gaze, underscored the ontological meanings of public space and body, emphasized how our physical and emotional states are intertwined with how we are being seen by others. This insight aligns with the

assertion by Theodoridou that publicness is inherently responsive rather than initiated. Performances or performative actions in public spaces similarly engage this dynamic, as they rely on the interplay between the performer and the audience. The audience's gaze and reaction are integral to the performative experience, creating a shared space of vulnerability and mutual recognition. This underscores the idea that public space is not just a physical field but a relational locus where identities are negotiated, and social meanings are co-created through embodied interactions.

Working on actions and temporalities

The exploration of different conversational structures within the practice of democracy and the dramaturgy of public space reveals how varied modes of dialogue can shape and enhance democratic and collective engagement. In the context of public space, conversations range from formal debates and public forums to spontaneous discussions and silent interactions, each contributing uniquely to democratic processes. These conversational structures facilitate diverse expressions of publicness and transindividual appearances. Formal debates often prioritize structured argumentation and the articulation of clear positions, while informal discussions can nurture inclusivity and the exchange of diverse perspectives. Silent interactions, those observed in performative acts such as the ones mentioned earlier on appearance and gaze, feature the power of presence and non-verbal communication in public spaces, underlining the embodied dimensions of democratic practice. By examining these varied conversational forms, we can better understand how public spaces serve as stages for democratic life, where the interplay of dialogue and performance creates a dynamic and participatory environment.

A simulated formal debate that took place during the workshop consisted in the typical action of standing up in front of a podium and sharing thoughts and concerns with the group. The debate centered around the question "Should we dance with politicians?", which was voted after we brainstormed on ways to reclaim the 'political' as a democratic practice of the people, rather than as a negative term in our mind, dominated as a practice only by politicians. Participants shared their point of view on why we should or should not dance with politicians, by incorporating the physical movement of exposing the body, and their expressive gestures. The outcome was highlighting not only the value of sharing and actively participating, but also the importance of listening, respecting and reflecting on the diverse opinions. This simulation of an assembly can be seen as a mind choreography, an exploration of tracing one's thoughts and tracing the thoughts of others.

The next phase of this exercise was a conversation structured again around standing in front of the podium, initiating a speech according to what had been said right before by the previous speaker, thus building directly on each other's thoughts. In this case, every new speaker standing up would begin with the phrase "I just heard that...". This approach allowed participants to continue the line of common thinking as it was developing in the room from one speaker to the next, engage deeper with the topic of discussion, foster a richer dialogue that emphasized the complexities and nuances of the relationship between citizens and politicians. In this way, participants also connected personal anecdotes with broader societal observations and concerns, enriching the discussion and following the temporality of it, unfolding from one speech to another: a build-up of thinking. The topic

highlighted the importance of vulnerability, transparency and trust in political engagement, questioning the established division between politicians and citizens. It also sparked ideas about how public spaces can serve as venues that encourage collective action, ultimately advocating for a more inclusive and participatory form of democracy.

An important discussion that also emerged in that phase of the workshop had to do with the role of voting within an assembly. Although voting is considered a democratic practice, it can also be perceived as the dictatorship of the majority, given that some people (those who are not part of the majority) will have to follow and stand behind decisions they do not agree with. While compromising is part of democratic processes, the issue that emerged here was whether there could be ways to commonly arrive at a decision after carefully negotiating and giving space to all perspectives to be heard and taken into consideration.

Another informal discussion that was realized during the workshop was a conversational exercise formulated solely through questions. Participants engaged in a dynamic and rhythmic dialogue that revealed the power of questioning as a form of communication. This method highlighted a neurolinguistic shift in understanding questioning as a fundamental form of dialogue. Instead of providing answers, participants were encouraged to reflect together, and dive into a collective thinking score. Each question opened new avenues of thought, prompting introspection and collective research. This shift from declarative statements to inquisitive dialogue transformed the conversation into an exploratory journey, where participants collaboratively constructed meaning and understanding, thereby defining the temporality of a thinking process, since each question had to be shared as a continuation of the question that was just previously heard.

By continually asking questions on the discourse of dramaturgy, we not only engaged more actively but also acknowledged the complexity of the topics discussed. This approach points out that questioning is not a means to elicit information but a powerful tool for nurturing connection and deeper comprehension on the practice of democracy and the dramaturgy of public space.

Creating and activating scores; a sensorial process of learning

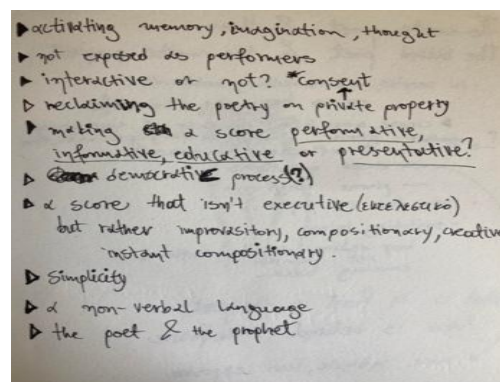
In the last two days of the workshop, participants focused on practicing and creating scores on the dramaturgy of public space. As a reference and starting point, the group activated the participatory performance score called “The Adversaries”, which is part of the artistic research of Theodoridou on the Practice of Democracy. As she mentioned:

“THE ADVERSARIES is a participatory performance installation that brings two small groups of people into a performative, playful conflict , observed by a third group of witnesses. The aim of the performance is to provide space to participants to (self-)reflect on the practice of conflict as a constitutive democratic practice. Through following a series of instructions, the three groups are guided to detect an existing conflict between them and to negotiate on it in a way that acknowledges the potential and possible limitations of the given guidelines. They thus attempt to co-create a new, third space that emerges from the synthesis of their views, as they confront each other and themselves.”

What is worth mentioning about this score is the experience of the third group that takes part in this performance; the witnesses. As observers, they are holding an active position, mentally and physically. They are invited to interrupt the process, address questions and keep the awareness of time and space. As I was participating as an observer to this score, the physical language of the adversaries, the chain of arguments, as well as the physical and emotional impact that a conflict can provoke, were the elements that highlighted the vulnerability of exposing one's body and ideas to someone else's. The score provides a language that prioritizes respect, recognition and reflection on physical and emotional states a process like this may evoke.

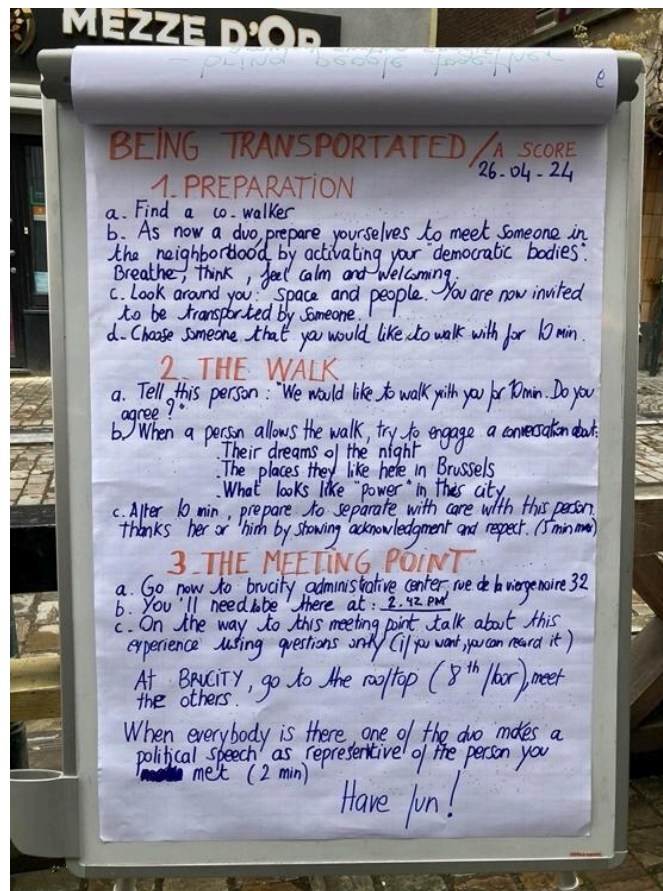
Inspired by this score, the discussions and exercises demonstrated and practiced during the workshop, participants were then invited to team up in three smaller groups and create their own scores that would generate publicness via their dramaturgical structures. In order to arrive to those scores, the whole group first brainstormed together on the principles and characteristics that such scores should include, for example, the need for collective awareness on the construction of public space; the importance of tuning physically into a score; the necessity to provide clarity of intentions and contextualization, as well as safety and time; and the need to allow a transformative process of the participants through a conscious rhythmicity. The three experiments that will be described below, illustrated how participatory scores can facilitate experiential learning, nourish empathy, and encourage participants to critically engage with their environment and each other.

The three different scores that were created, were all realized in public open spaces, outside the studio where the workshop took place. The first score entitled "The blind poet and the mute prophet", a rather complicated and multitasked score, proposed the metaphorical aspect of time and direction by having one body moving frontwards and the other backwards. What is in front of the body is the past, what is behind is the future. Participants coupled up, and trained during the warmup of the score through non-verbal communication about boundaries and signs they would decide upon, to help them direct each other while they would be moving backwards in the street. One's body moved backwards and the other took care of their partner, whilst they engaged into a conversation about dramaturgy formulated on questions that would be answered with yes or no. This score was later described by participants as a cinematic experience. It cultivated trust and an intimate connection by asking participants to guide each other in public space while engaging in a reflective dialogue, emphasizing care and mutual support in public settings.



notes taken during the development of the score

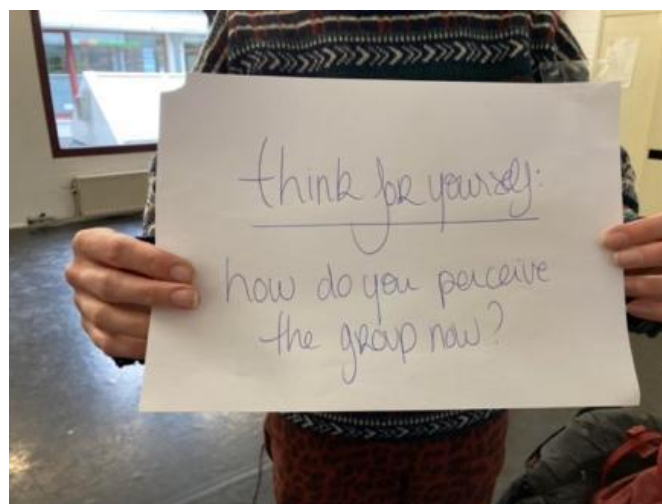
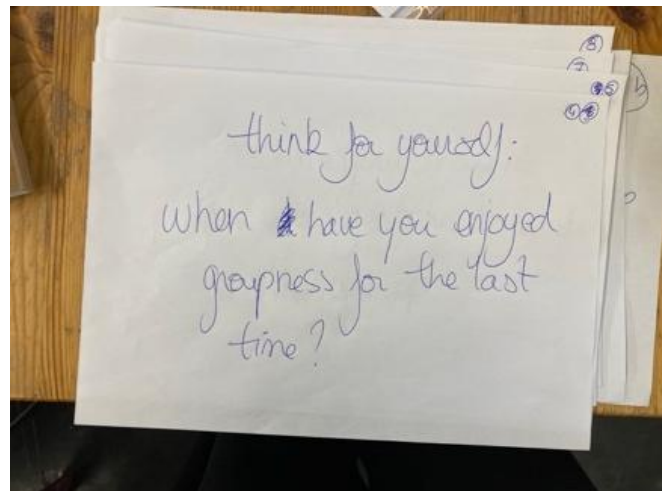
The second score was called "Being transportated" and was described in writing in a detailed way. It proposed us to meet people we didn't know in the street and ask them if we could walk with them for a few minutes while engaging into a conversation with them.



As a participant in this score, I discovered that trust in public spaces towards strangers is not to be taken for granted. It is remarkable to note that in a hectic and busy city like Brussels, people in the streets are suspicious of allowing contact and a possible moment of sharing. Some other participants described this score as hitchhiking on foot, reflecting on the performativity of bodies, of temporalities and their preconceptions. The task of approaching a person in the street and asking for a small encounter, comes for some of us as a courageous act on the here and now and the now or never. Finally, creating a political speech as a representation of our encounters, depicted the sharing of the experience as a performative and at the same time political act. The score highlighted the challenges and potentials of initiating spontaneous interactions with strangers, revealing insights into social suspicion and the performative nature of everyday encounters.

The third and last score, which was untitled, was communicated step by step through written instructions that were given simultaneously with the realization of each task. It began by inviting the participants to stand in a circle, breathe, and reflect silently on the topic of coming together and being part of a group. Choosing a gesture that saluted the group, and later a word that resumed our thoughts, we shared our reflections and the space together. The next chapter of the score was walking backwards altogether for 12 minutes. After that, we were all given a paper and asked to take separate routes in the city to read the

paper later on our own. Walking backwards in public space evoked a sense of care and support, so that everyone would feel safe. Forming a circle and gradually separating from the group individually was followed by the next written instruction each one of us was given, which involved the activation of our senses, observing the environment and thinking of one single memory that we would like to keep from it. Returning to the studio, we shared our chosen memories and reflected on the score. For most of us, the moment of separating from the group was perceived quite strongly, as we felt isolated and disconnected from each other, even lonely and detached. The score involved group reflection, synchronized movements, and solitary contemplation, bringing out the significance of both communal belonging and individual introspection in public space.



Through embodied practice, shared experiences and theoretical reading and reflection, the workshop offered valuable opportunities for collective growth, enhancing the personal, the political and the pedagogical impact of exploring public space dramaturgy and democratic practices. Over five days, we shared our reflections and explored our creativity collectively, by taking significant steps towards understanding the other. The workshop provided us tools to grasp diverse complex ideas, political concerns and social needs that expand our intricate identities, performativities and positions within a transindividual society.

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