

Traffic Lights: Re-writing Urban Public Space Through Walking

Beginning of the walk

inject (verb)

- 1 Introduce (a liquid, especially a drug or vaccine) into the body with a syringe
- 2 Introduce (something) under pressure into a passage, cavity, or solid material
- 3 Introduce (a new or different element) into something
- 4 Place (a spacecraft or other object) into an orbit or trajectory (Oxford Dictionary)

This walk aims to explore my recent performance created in the urban public space¹ of Riga, Latvia, which I named *Traffic Lights*. The work serves as a case study demonstrating a particular approach to site-specific art in urban public spaces that I have been recently practicing. Aside from Riga, I also executed similar projects i.e. in Snežnik (Slovenia), Bucharest (Romania) or Akureyri (Iceland) (the same year of 2017).

The strategy I have in mind is a distant and general way of working with the site while most of the research on the place is done in advance. Preparations are not done *in situ* but from a distance in libraries, through the internet, phone and Skype calls, map reading and similar. For *Traffic Lights* I was not deeply interested in engaging with the local community or studying the history of the place in detail. I had prepared the core concept of the piece before ever visiting the site, and once I was there only small details were adjusted.

Is such an approach to site-specific work legitimate?
One might easily disregard it as too shallow (only touching the surfaces of issues of the respective sites)

- 1 In this essay I consider the two terms in their general sense – public space as an open, accessible area (in the city) which stands in opposition to the private space closed to the public and accessible to individuals only. Similarly the urban environment I see in general terms as such which is more densely populated, as well as its built up area is larger and more dense in comparison to the rural setting.

without engaging with them on a deeper level) and disconnected (not knowing the local conditions, being unfamiliar with how locals perceive the site). There is indeed a danger to misinterpret the dynamics of the performed places and in the worst case to even cause harm to them by for example only supporting the known stereotypes and clichés about the location. Such artistic and research related failures might of course occur even after more profound engagement with the place. Nevertheless, one might expect that a work created after several months of researching *in situ* will probably unfold more than one which was developed from a distance.

From this perspective of long-term, in-depth engagement with sites my work might be in danger of being seen as somewhat inadequate. In the following I wish to prove its value by examining *Traffic Lights* through two different theoretical concepts. At first the work will be related to terminology of site-specific art provided by the British group Wrights&Sites². Secondly, I intend to consider *Traffic Lights* in relation to theories of French philosopher Michel de Certeau. With the help of de Certeau I hope to prove how the work is useful in re-writing (from the position of myself-the artist) and re-reading (from the position of the audience) urban public space through walking or observing walking. I consider it important to mention that, in addition to its visual and other physical qualities, the work has also a strong conceptual character. Hence, when it is read through de Certeau it might be helpful to understand it as such, as a theoretical concept realized in practice.

It seems we are ready. Now we just need to get familiar with the terrain.

- 2 Wright&Sites consists of artists Stephen Hodge, Simon Persighetti, Phil Smith and Cathy Turner.

Riga, Latvia; June 2017

presented as part of Riga Performance Days

For the duration of the piece (three hours) I was passing from one side of the street to the other using pedestrian crossings. I deliberately chose an intersection where it was possible to walk in a circle (or, better yet, a square) and where the traffic lights were installed on both sides of the street. Each time before I crossed the street I waited for the green light.

The performance was a comment on the ways how the organization of urban public space structures the possibilities of human movement. The chosen intersection was a rather calm one; most of the time I could have crossed the street safely even with the red light on. Yet by doing so I would have violated the rules of the city, and could have even be fined for my behavior. Hence, when following the order applicable within the infrastructure of the city and enforced through the given law and the machines installed in it (the traffic lights), I was artificially forced to cross the street in a certain manner that limited the choices of movement I might otherwise have.

After a few hours of following the order of being synchronized with the traffic lights, I had a feeling of becoming a strange mixture between a human and a robot. The topic of the mechanization of the human body³ is expressed in Godfrey Reggio's movie *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982). In Reggio's opus magnum, the movement of crowds, made up either of pedestrians or those inside motorized vehicles, is depicted as fully

3 See for example works and writings of Survival Research Laboratories, Orlan, Stelarc, Franko B, Heli Rekula, Charlie Chaplin...

interconnected with the organism of a megacity. It is the system of pavements, roads, highways, pedestrian crossings, *traffic lights* and similar which prescribes *when* and *where* one can go, as the movie reminds us. The orders issued by traffic lights are very simple: either they order you to go or to stop (in case of motorized traffic the orange light provides also a warning that the order to stop is coming). One of my interests during *Traffic Lights* performance was to explore the influence of this command system on myself. It is important to say that it was not the city in particular which inspired me but the way the traffic light systems work in cities in general. What I was searching for was a squared crossing near the performance venue and I indeed found a one.

For my preliminary research I used Google Maps street view software.⁴ It was possible to find out on the map display that there actually was a crossing convenient for my project near the main festival space. I could see on the map that there were traffic lights on each of the crossings I planned to use, that the intersection seemed rather quiet and small, and that the streets were designed for the movement of motorized vehicles and pedestrians.

My aim was to use the particularity of the crossing for the expression of a general idea. Yet it was also essential to execute the performance in that particular site, in the given time. This basic dichotomy stands in the core of the work.

4 I did not have any special reason why to prioritize the Google Maps digital cartographical tool over other ones (such as Bing's StreetSide).

During *Traffic Lights* it was important to me that – having also in mind the history of the medium of performance/body art – I was directly experiencing, feeling the body, its progressing tiredness, the pain caused by the rigid way of walking, the ways how I was (not) interacting with the public, my shifts in moods, the flow of thoughts and similar. I was concentrating on the work itself, on the creation of the image, on keeping up the focus and my neutrality.

This kind of inward oriented, subjective performer could be in accordance to artist and writer Suzanne Lacy's categorization of "artist-as-experencer"⁵, one who "becomes a conduit for the experience of others" (Lacy 1995: 174). Unlike as, for example the "artist as activist", for the artist-as-experencer it is "the work [which becomes] a metaphor for relationship" (Ibid.).

Alike to other long durational and body art performances (such as for example Zhang Huan's *12m²* (1994) or Chris Burden's *Five Day Locker Piece* (1971)) I also closed myself from the audience in order to offer empathy with the reality around us through my inner experience (Lacy 1995: 174-175). My colleague and tireless performance art archivist Christopher Hewitt rightly pointed out that such a type of performance "works for the audience as a 'found' object" (Hewitt 2017). The body is indeed objectivized and functions mainly just as a tool through which the work is executed. The relationship with the audience is then, rather, metaphorical.

I had two basic types of audiences: those visiting the performance festival who were aware

5 Lacy establishes four often overlapping categories of artists: "artist as experencer – artist as reporter – artist as analyst – artist as activist" (Lacy 1995).

of my performance, and the random passersby. Due to its minimalistic nature, the performance might have been in many cases not perceived as a work of art at all. Yet for those who had for one reason or another a chance to watch me walk one or more full circles, the unnaturalness of my behavior had to be obvious (either as art or just as strange behavior).

For the festival visitors it was possible to acknowledge the performance as a work of art immediately after encountering it as I had announced it in advance. Some of the audience members were performers themselves, professionals in the field.⁶ The long duration of the performance enabled the festival audience to come back repeatedly and to observe more closely and deliberately the progress of the work.

As opposed to the informed festival audience, the majority of the random passersby did not, I assume, recognize my walking as art. For them, the performance could have hardly been read in the context of (performance) art and its history, and so the group was lacking some possible ways of reading. On the other hand, this lack of labeling the work as art might have enabled a more straightforward affect in the audience.

To me personally the project brought, as similar projects always bring, a great joy to pretend that I am a regular pedestrian walking from one side of the

6 Out of this specific group even smaller amount also reacted to my performance in a direct way through their own "micro-performances".

street to the other, while in fact I am “secretly” performing, conducting my mission as a professional secret agent. There is, nonetheless, one important difference between me performing and the camouflage of a hypothetical spy. I do not mind if I am exposed, quite the contrary. If a random person consciously or subconsciously identifies in my performance something unusual, disturbing, thought-provoking, aesthetically pleasing, funny or is otherwise affected it means I have succeeded – I did influence someone's life through my art. This is of course very difficult to measure.

Such a minimalistic, almost invisible approach to (performative) art stands in opposition to big theatre shows, operas and musicals where the actor's performance results in the applause of a crowd – the bigger the applause, the more successful the presentation was. To walk for several hours in a public space logically implies encounters with various publics. Yet this audience will not applaud. When the performance was over I simply left the place as



silent and unnoticed as
I came.

My audience was a diverse, ever-changing urban community consisting of a mixture of local inhabitants as well as tourists. I did not discuss with any locals what kind of relevance the particular pedestrian crossing had to them. It was not necessary for the work, as despite its effect in the given place, in the given time, it could be easily relocated to another location where other heterogeneous audiences would be present.



Site-specificities

Artist Richard Serra states that it is not possible to relocate a site-specific work from its original site without it being “destroyed” (Serra 1994: 194 in Kaye 2000: 2). As I intend to show below, also Wrights&Sites are of the same opinion on relocating art which is called site-specific. Yet another voice, that of Scottish artist Paul Pinson, tells us that the same performance might be presented in different sites but in such case it is not possible to call it anymore site-specific (Pinson responding to Fiona Wilkie's survey in Wilkie 2002: 149). Since my work could be easily relocated, it should not be labeled as site-specific, at least according to Pinson. But how should it be called, then? Let me search now for the answer with the help of some terminological tools developed by Wrights&Sites.

When talking about the relation between a (theatre) performance and a site Wrights&Sites define five different categories “on a sliding scale of site specificity” (Park 2014: 37): “in theatre building / outside theatre / site-sympathetic / site-generic / site-specific” (Wrights&Sites 2001 in Wilkie 2002: 150). For my case the last three might prove most useful.

The truly *site-specific* works are, according to Wrights&Sites, only “performance[s] specifically generated from / for one selected site” whilst the term *site-generic* stands for performances “generated for a series of like sites (e.g. car parks, swimming pools)” (ibid). In that sense *Traffic Lights* seems to be rather “site-generic” than “site-specific”. The work was prepared without deeper inspiration “from [...] selected site” and could definitely be re-situated in many similar “like sites”, i.e. in other traffic light crossings. The fact that so far I performed only one traffic light performance does not change the generic nature of the work.

Should the performance be called site-generic instead of site-specific does not anyhow degrade its quality. It only emphasizes that the work is of a different nature to the type which could emerge only *from* and *for* the particular site.

Also Wrights&Sites' definition of *site-sympathetic* suggests an intriguing way of reading. Such a term stands for an "existing performance text physicalized in a selected site" (Ibid.). The "text" or the "script" of *Traffic Lights* might be said to be very similar to some of my other recent works such as *Crossing Eyjafjörður* (when I walked back and forth on the bridge across the fjord) or *Walking the Castle* (when I was repeatedly walking around the castle). If a script or a score would have been written (as in fact for none of those works an actual physical script has been created) it might consist of the following instructions: to walk a given path in as neutral manner as possible, in a neutral speed, without unnecessary movements, with full concentration and without speaking or otherwise engaging with the audience, dressed in black clothes.

All the mentioned works – *Traffic Lights*, *Crossing Eyjafjörður* as well as *Walking the Castle* might then be seen as different actualizations of the same text, of which the meaning changes depending on the selected site where the "existing performance text" has been physicalized but they still remain one and the same performance. When read as site-sympathetic

it might be possible to give to all of the works a general title such as *Walking* to which different respective suffixes might be added; *Walking: Pedestrian Crossing*; *Walking: Fjord*; or *Walking: Castle*.

As it seems, the usage of either the term site-generic or site-symphatetic (depending on the approach of the piece) appears to be more adequate than site-specific. Hence, as a conclusion of this section, it might be said that *Traffic Lights* and my other similar performances are working with specific sites and relate to the site-specific genre. Nevertheless, seen from the perspective of the more subtle differentiation by *Wrights&Sites*, they should be considered either site-generic or site-symphatetic works, not site-specific.

For the final stop in our journey, we are to stand back from the terminology of site-specific works and consider *Traffic Lights* as a performance of walking, a possibility for re-writing and re-reading the urban public space.

“The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered.” de Certeau 1984: 97

This statement from Michel de Certeau stands in the core of his thinking about the relationship between walking and speaking (or writing). For de Certeau “the act of walking” (equalling “the speech act”) is an activity of spatializing, of practicing the place.⁷ Adding also to the pool of terminology of site-specific studies, de Certeau later in his canonical book *The Practice of Everyday Life* adds that a “*space is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers” (de Certeau 1984: 117, original italics).

The walking represents, hence, the expression of an individual – it is he or she him- or herself who makes the decisions where, in what speed and manner he or she does or does not go. The pedestrian's speech act is a poem (de Certeau 2014: 93) written over the city. Unfortunately, as de Certeau puts it straightforwardly, “the ordinary practitioners of the city [...] whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' [...] write without being able to read it.” (Ibid.) The common passersby are part of “networks of these moving, intersecting writings [which] compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator.” (Ibid.)

The freedom of the walker's speech act is always blind, always possible only within the constraints of the given city environment (which can be compared to the

7 Without going too far into the common discussion in the field – the never ending defining of what the “site”, the “place” and the “space” means – for now let me just adopt the definition of de Certeau (cf. i.e. writings of Miwon Kwon, Shannon Jackson, David Harvey or Doreen Massey, to name just a few).

discourse of language). As performance scholar Nick Kaye summarizes in his book on site-specific art: “Adopting the semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between the *langue*, the complex of rules and conventions which constitute a language, and the *parole*, the practice of speech in which these rules are given expression, de Certeau reads ‘place’ as an ordered and ordering system realised in ‘spatial practices’.” (Kaye 2000: 3–4, original italics).

It is no coincidence that de Certeau refers to Michel Foucault when speaking about the “apparatuses that produce a disciplinary space, [...] a contradiction between the collective mode of administration [urban system/langue] and an individual mode of reappropriation [walking/parole]”. (de Certeau 1984: 96)

It is important to emphasize that de Certeau does not refer to works of art but, as the title of his book sums it, to the “practice(s) of everyday life”. What is important for me, then, is what happens when one knowingly defragments “the long [and blind] poem of walking” (de Certeau 1984: 101) and transforms it into an art piece. Such a conscious walk will of course encounter the same issues as the speech act constrained within the language system. The ideological impact of the language/urban system can be hardly denied; the question of how effective an individual's resistance can be in his or her enunciations is a matter of opinion.

To me *Traffic Lights* provided an opportunity to read a so-called urban text from a distance. I am not saying objectively, because I was still bringing my own subjectivity to the site and once being *in situ* I was inevitably submerged in the

respective urban discourse. Yet what is the possible weakness of the work – the lack of a closer connection to the site and a deeper understanding of its context – is at the same time its strength. It was the French film director Bruno Dumont at the Vladivostok International Film Festival 2007 who stated that he accepted the position as a member of the jury in the festival because for him Vladivostok was so far, so unknown. As an outsider, he hoped to provide a fresh perspective (Dumont's speech is documented in Joana Preiss's movie *Sibérie* 2011).

Also, whether coming as an insider or an outsider, I personally do (want to) believe that there is a difference between the blind usage of the urban system and its conscious, artistic usage. *Traffic Lights* might be in this sense read as a sort of homeopathic performance. Instead of finding new pathways, new “words” how to “speak” the city, I decided to “write over” the very rigorous part of the system – the traffic light crossings.

In a way, a similar strategy can be found in Philip Glass' *Knee*, the song from Glass and Robert Wilson's opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1976). The endless repetition of the numbers one – two – three – four – five – six – seven – eight – one – two – three – four – five – six – seven – eight

ignores the usual way how they are used in mathematics and instead establishes a new, abstract relation to them. The numbers in *Knee* are being performed in a precise order, creating a new, unknown yet still rigorous system by kidnapping them (respectively their verbal signifiers) from their natural mathematical environment and verbalizing them in a specific way which is both very exact and “useless”.

Similarly as in *Traffic Lights*, the new logical and rigorous subsystem operating within the *langue* of the urban system is created. Through my performative proclamation of walking a possibility for re-reading of the urban environment was offered to the audience. A “vaccine” (see the definition of the verb “to inject” in the beginning of the essay), a “drug” has been introduced in the form of my walking body, which enables to see the site, to read the site from the perspective of an unusual intoxication. Or, better yet, an unusual sobriety. Just as in John Carpenter's movie *They Live* (1988) when the main



character distinguishes, by putting on special sunglasses, which of his fellow inhabitants of the city are humans and which are aliens masking as humans.

In *Traffic Lights*, the usual way of enunciating the city through the walker's performance was replaced, re-written. My way of using the pedestrian crossing was not effective in its usual way. It did not serve as a tool to secure safe crossing over the street, since after the successful crossing over I did not continue forward but instead circled around. The illogical way of using urban public space shook the values of the fictional world of the urban system and within the given urban discourse created a new (sub)system with new values (cf. de Certeau referring to the fiction theory in de Certeau 1984: 99).

One of the possible meanings of the verb “to inject” is “to introduce (a new or different element) into something”. In the case of *Traffic Lights* this new or different element was myself, my body introduced into the urban public space through the performance of walking. Visiting the place for the first time I was “an alien” there, “a spacecraft placed into a trajectory” of a pedestrian crossing, “a drug or vaccine introduced into the body” of the city. Unknown by the locals I came, unknown I left.

In order to acknowledge the potential of this “injection” it should not be approached in exactly the same way as what is usually understood by the term site-specific art for there are conceptual differences. One of the possible ways of understanding my walks better is to read them as a sort of detoxification strategy. Re-walking/re-writing the site in a rigorous yet illogical way offers (at least on the theoretical level) possibilities for its re-reading.

Now you can rest, my partner in walking, as the walk is over.



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