

Site-specific performance on the streets: (In)visible Dancing

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Abstract. According to Patrice Pavis(1998, pp. 337-8), "The key to a site-specific performance is the search for a venue that is often unconventional but has a historical significance and characteristic atmosphere, such as: a freight yard, an abandoned factory, a city block, a courtyard or a suite", in which a classical or contemporary text is incorporated and where the new framework will give the performance with a special charm and unexpected energy." In 2019 I participated as a dancer in a site-specific performance project—— (in)visible Dancing on a street in the city of London, which took place in London's Woolwich Town Centre, in the form of performers bursting onto the high street, crossroads and squares in seemingly improvised, site-specific dance, culminating in a performance by the performers, live musicians. The performance ends with a massive finale featuring the performers, live musicians and passers-by who have learned the steps. The aim of the project was to bring together different sections of the community, from apprentices to local performers and ordinary people, reconnecting them with their shopping streets and each other. This essay may use (in)visible Dancing as an example to analyze the relationship between site-specific performance and society and the city, and also the potential engagement of theatre with geography in the context of the expansion of site-specific performance.

Keywords: site-specific performance, art festival, performing arts, dance, theatre.

1. Introduction

In (In) visible Dancing 2019 in London, UK, I perform as a traditional Chinese dancer in a site-specific performance on the streets of a transnational culture in the UK. The performance includes repertoires about different ethnicities and cultures, as well as an improvisation on the streets of London in interplay with the local people and community space.

(In) visible Dancing, held at London's Woolwich Town Centre and initiated by Protein Dance UK in 2010, is an emerging participatory performance that embraces the concept of 'flash mobs.' The format involves performers popping up on high streets, crossroads, and squares to perform seemingly improvised, situational dances that match the venue, culminating in a mass finale of performers from various backgrounds, live musicians, and passers-by who have learned the steps. [1] This event has continued to this day, with only a one-year hiatus in 2020 due to the epidemic, bringing fresh energy to British dance theatre.

Goldsmiths Confucius Institute for Dance and Performance, where I was working, was one of the participating groups invited to perform as a team representing Chinese culture. We performed Chinese classical and Chinese folk dance repertoire, demonstrating Chinese kung fu and live Chinese instruments. The event invited nine arts groups from different countries and cultural backgrounds in London to perform live alongside Protein Dance UK.

According to Patrice Pavis, "The key to a site-specific performance is the search for a venue that is often unconventional but has a historical significance and characteristic atmospheres, such as a freight yard, an abandoned factory, a city block, a courtyard, or a suite," in which a classical or contemporary text is incorporated and where the new framework will give the performance with a special charm and unexpected energy." [2] Looking back on (In)visible Dancing from my current position, two years after attending the show, I think the director Luca Silvestrini wanted to make his own interpretation of the city through site-specific performances in the streets and squares. In my opinion, this site-specific performance is closely linked to society and the city, above all by breaking down the boundaries between classes within the space, deconstructing and reconstructing the relationships between people. In his 2011 book, Jackson argues that this kind of artistic activity

creates social inclusivity and collectivity in a collective, multicultural context.[3] Secondly, the venues chosen by (In)visible Dancing: the streets and squares of the city, allow the performance to reconnect the people of this space with the space in which they live. Finally, he makes people of different cultures and ethnicities rethink their own identities as they stand in the same space for a transnational performance.

2. (In) visible Dancing breaks down social class boundaries

On the day of the performance, people from all over the world, including Kenya, Pakistan, Hawaii, Spain, China, and the UK, gathered in the Woolwich town center for this performance. The city's large public space is a microcosm of the city's complex social fabric, bringing together people of all races, classes, and identities at the same time. At the start of the performance, the performers are scattered throughout the space of Woolwich, and as the music plays, each team, in turn, drops their ongoing imitation of everyday behavior from different parts of the venue, takes off their coats to reveal their costumes and runs towards the center of the square to perform their own cultural performance. In the performance, performers, and audiences of different classes, races, and identities share the same space and are connected through the act of performance, breaking down old class boundaries and forming a new social collective.

As a result of outside distractions, each of us is effectively 'performing' or 'shaping' the person we want to be in our everyday lives. [4] This performance is like wearing a vest over our bodies which represents who we are, our position in society, our class. This vest is either forced on us by external factors or changed by us subjectively. Thus, in society, we are forced to 'perform' as a certain class, identity, or race. However, when people of different classes and identities perform together in the same space because of theatre and performance, each 'individual' in the 'collective' is integrated into the performance, and theatre allows each 'individual' to forget the identity they portray and perform in their everyday lives and enter a new identity in the theatre. At this point, the boundaries between each 'individual' from different 'collectives' are broken down, and a new connection is re-established between the 'individual' and the scene, together forming a new kind of collective is a unique ecology. [5] This connection, brought about by (In)visible Dancing, breaks down the boundaries between classes and reconnects people together.

3. (In) visible Dancing reconnects the people of Woolwich Town Centre with their living space

(In)visible Dancing takes place in the high street and square of Woolwich town center. It is a space where people live their daily lives. The square is filled with passers-by taking coffee breaks, children playing with bubbles, and old people sunbathing; the busy shopping street is filled with enthusiastic shoppers and salespeople soliciting business, as well as white-collar workers who happen to walk past. I call this performance space, where people live and work together, a large public space with a social character. It is a space for human activity, a part of people's daily lives, a social space that holds the memories and lives of the inhabitants. When we perform in this area, the audience sees the work as an imitation of their daily lives in this space that holds their memories, at which point they become deeply connected to their own memories and the performance space.

In "Theatre the City," Harvey refers to theatre as part of the urban process that generates the urban experience and, in turn, the city itself. [6] Theatre is central to the cultural life of the city and has the social function of bringing people together. The street can therefore be described as a 'cohesive place' for dramatic events throughout the city, where site-specific performances take place to better connect people's daily lives with Woolwich town center.

After the performance in the middle of the square, on the other side of Woolwich High Street, in a shopping street, Protein Dance and our nine participating teams entered the street space in turn to perform a mobile performance. We moved through the crowd, interacting with the street audience in

a seemingly improvised way, depending on our surroundings. It is important to note that this is not a fully improvised performance, but rather a combination of mostly choreographed movements in the rehearsal room and a small amount of improvisation on the spot, giving the audience the impression that we are performing on the street in a seemingly improvised way. During the performance, improvised interactions occur at any time, depending on the audience's reaction and the environment. The aim of this seemingly improvised performance is to allow the audience to blur the boundaries between art and life while shifting between the living space and the theatre space. From Harvey's perspective, this blurring of the boundaries between art and life is seen as a way of validating the constitution of the everyday activities of life and its meaning [7]. Here, however, I see it as a way of liberating the audience by breaking down the boundaries between the audience space and the performance space, allowing them to better experience and engage with the performance and become integrated into the new community in which they watch it.

On the day of the performance, unlike other performances, there was no rehearsal before the official start, just a map and performance order given to each group an hour before the performance in order to create a seemingly 'improvised' performance on the street.

We started in the square in Woolwich, wore our everyday jackets over our costumes, and then walked down the shopping street to mingle with the people coming and going. The performers were asked to put on their everyday costumes and scatter down the street, playing everyday people. I sat in front of a supermarket and 'played' the shopper, reading the discounted items posted in the window. When the live marching band came to my place to play my music, I immediately took off my coat and went from 'audience' to 'actor,' using a shopping bag and a box as props on the steps in front of the supermarket. I performed the dance I had prepared in the rehearsal hall, including shoppers, cashier counts, and staff who stocked the supermarket and interacted with the audience around me. When my performance was over, I had to switch to the role of 'audience' and go back to my normal life, blending in with the crowds on the shopping street in a way that I was 'unnoticed.'

As an actor, I switch between the passer-by, spectator, and performer roles on this street, while the pedestrians on the street switch between being spectators, participants in the performance, and their own daily lives. When walking along the street, people are their everyday selves, performing everyday acts in an everyday space. When a site-specific performance suddenly begins somewhere on the street, people become spectators or participants in the performance, joining the space of the performance, and the everyday space is transformed at this moment into a theatrical space, reconnecting people to the space. With the end of the performance, people return to the space of everyday life.

This performance in a specific location on the street makes people in the city more aware of their own lives. Like the performances that take place on the high street, they relate to people's memories of everyday life in that space. For example, in (In)visible Dancing in front of Sainsbury, the performers use elements of performance from the shop and display them in dance; by the post box, letter writing, postal mail, and the daily life of the postman are used as inspiration for the piece. The performance takes place in the street, mimicking elements of skateboarding and sculpture. This site-specific performance amplifies the everyday elements of people's lives and the stories of their lives and presents them again in an artistically processed form to the audience. Audience members who watch the performance not only gain a greater awareness of how they live in the city but also reconnect with the space they live in through the performance.

4. Perceptions of identity in transnational performance

In defining 'identity,' Deaux argues that 'identity' refers to the similarities and differences that an individual finds with others; it gives a sense of presence. It is an important part of the concept of the self, the individual's perception of the group to which he or she belongs.[8] I see it as an 'I' or 'we' issue, involving the individual's or group's perception of its independence or specificity. Thus, in (visible) dance, when participants from different backgrounds around the world perform together,

who am I at this moment? Does my identity change when I stand as a Chinese dancer performing in a transnational geographical context? What is our group identity when I perform collectively with these people from different countries in the transnational territory of the UK?

4.1. who am I?

I have been invited to perform in (In)visible Dancing as an overseas dancer for the Goldsmiths Confucius Institute for Dance and Performance, and the Confucius Institute manages my salary. The Confucius Institute is a Chinese non-profit government organization whose aim is to promote and teach Chinese culture and language around the world. It is funded and arranged by the China Foundation for International Education and the State Hanban (an organization formerly affiliated with the Chinese government) for public education and cultural promotion projects.[9]

Therefore, one of my identities in In(visible) Dancing can be described as an overseas Chinese dancer funded by the Chinese government to spread and promote Chinese culture. My role as a recipient of Chinese government funding to use my own body as a medium for trans-regional Chinese dance practice in the UK is influenced by identity politics. The Chinese government uses culture as a means of diplomacy, supporting overseas performances of Chinese culture with funding, and using the act of performance to represent Chinese culture and politics to understand Chinese culture and its diversity.

When I performed the Chinese dance in the middle of Woolwich Square, I wore a long red Uighur dress, a metaphor for Chinese culture—dancing a dance unique to the Uighur people, "moving my neck from side to side," "snapping my fingers" and "constantly flipping my wrists." These flower-like dance movements representing Chinese culture and my Asian face performing in a transnational space made me explore my identity more deeply and made me think about questions I had never thought about before. Who am I at this moment? When all the features point to my ethnicity, my cultural identity, I have a clear and definite idea of who I am at this moment, a Chinese dancer. At the same time, my sense of belonging to my own race and nationality is amplified.

Chinese dance as a carrier of culture is one of the Chinese folk cultures. This dance is the embodiment of a range of material and spiritual cultures developed by the Chinese people in the course of their lives and production. In a cross-cultural context, folk culture is the most ethnically distinctive culture. As such, Chinese dance serves as a Chinese symbol through which the audience can learn about Chinese customs, culture, and emotions. The Chinese dance I perform brings Chinese culture to the streets of the UK, meeting and communicating with cultures and politics from around the world. At this point, my identity is as a communicator, as a go-between, and as a performer.

4.2. Did my identity change when performing in transnational geography?

However, my identity changed during the transnational artistic event when I performed with British dancers in improvisation and site-specific performances at HIGH STREET. Forbes argues that performance has the ability to manipulate identity. [10] This is because the place and society in which the performance takes place have an impact on the construction of identity.

In a transnational context, my role as a Chinese dancer entails a fixed program of performances in specific local venues and interactive improvisations with people in venues and roadside environments in a British cultural context. Therefore, I would be too abrupt to force Chinese dance into my specific performance space on Woolwich High Street to qualify as a 'site-specific performance.' When traditional Chinese dance was not feasible to perform on the Woolwich High Street, I chose to observe and imitate people's everyday behavior on the road and perform it. Here, I am no longer just a Chinese dancer; my identity is reinvented. In one person, two cultures are accommodated at the same time: Chinese folk culture and everyday British culture. The elements of my dance performance in front of Sainsbury's were based on scenes of life and everyday behavior observed in and around the supermarket beforehand. For example, when performing in front of the supermarket, I would include elements of children asking their parents for snacks, grandmothers with shopping lists, and serious security guards at the door. As dancers who have been trained in Chinese dance since childhood, it is

inevitable that even mimetic performances will include Chinese cultural symbols, as the memory of these movements is embedded in our blood. At this point, the intersection of culture and performance reshapes my identity, with elements of Chinese dance symbols and mimicry of everyday British behavior appearing in my body movements at the same time.

4.3. What is the collective identity of the group?

Valentine believes that 'who we are emerges from the interaction of a particular spatial context and a particular biological moment. When I performed with eight other participants from different countries in this transnational territory, were we able to find our identity as a group in the context of a specific spatial context and the interaction of a specific biological moment?

After the performance, all the performers returned to Woolwich Square for a large line and group dance performance. This line dance is open to all audience members, and anyone can join in at any time. Participants are free to follow the dance movements and spontaneously communicate their daily emotions. It is worth investigating what new connections are made when people from different cultures do the same movements in the same space that represents Woolwich. Musicians came from all corners to the middle of the square and all the performers from different cultures, including myself, invited the surrounding audience to join them in the middle of the square to learn simple steps in preparation for the group dance at the end of the performance. More and more people join in, and eventually, the audience, performers, and band players fill the entire performance space, all making the same moves in the same space.

According to linguist J.L. Austin, the "act of speech" has a certain power of spectatorship or the power of doing. If the act of speaking has some power, then if we bring this power into performance, the spontaneous act of the audience joining in the final group dance may be answered. When all those in the same space break class boundaries and stand together as the same 'participants,' doing the same movements. What does this power bring? Is it a reawakening of the perception of self-identity?

Firstly, each participant has gone from being an 'individual' to being part of a 'collective,' relationships between people have changed, and the perception of them has changed; everyone is now part of a 'collective' enjoying theatre and performance rather than people from different races and classes around the world. The space in Woolwich, as a vehicle, accommodates cultures from all over the world. Its inclusiveness influences the behavior of people in society.

Second, to awaken a renewed sense of their own identity in each participant. In my case, as a Chinese dancer, my ethnicity has not changed at this moment; I am still Chinese. But my identity has been reconstructed in an unfamiliar social and geographical context because my body, bearing the stamp of race and culture, is in this moment doing the same movements as people from different cultural backgrounds, joining this reconstructed collective. At this moment, we are no longer performers representing our own race but part of this collective, under the same venue and in an inclusive society.

5. Conclusion

(in) Visible Dancing stands as an exemplary paradigm of how site-specific performances adeptly amalgamate artistic expression, social engagement, and urban revitalization. By embracing unconventional venues and actively involving a diverse array of community members, the performance transcended the confines of traditional theater, fostering profound connections between individuals and their city. This project illuminates the potential of site-specific performances to function as catalysts for cultivating social cohesion, reshaping public spaces, and nurturing a profound sense of belonging among urban residents.

As the realm of theatre continues to evolve in its interaction with geography, site-specific performances are poised to assume an increasingly pivotal role in shaping the cultural landscape of cities. By challenging the conventional notion of performance spaces and skillfully integrating the urban environment as an integral narrative component, such performances offer a rejuvenating and

dynamic avenue to investigate the interplay between art, society, and the urban milieu. (in)visible Dancing exemplifies how the convergence of site-specific performance and urban spaces can engender a lasting impact on communities, leaving an indelible imprint that extends beyond the ephemeral nature of the performance itself, reigniting a profound sense of attachment to the city at large.

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