It is a commonplace today that democratic structures guarantee the participation of everyone, but if we look closer into what really happens we see that this is achieved not without some cost. This cost usually takes the form of too long procedures, bureaucracy and therefore, loss of interest. The ‘action’ is limited to the ‘election’. In a general climax of increasing speed, our urban environment changes so slowly that a whole generation is needed to visualize it. But small communities are making the difference. They are taking the command, occupying empty plots, activating public spaces and managing the collective means at hand. They have decided just to do it. All these seminal experiences are building a new way of place-making. Even if they are scattered around the globe, some common qualities can be identified. By the inversion of the classical deductive method they predicate a new direction along the line that links analysis to action. As many of the action art techniques (i.e: performance, happening and installation) they are not a means to an end, but ends in themselves. They are worth being considered just because they have been done. To unravel the institutional stagnation is perhaps their only aim. This paper investigates the relationships between the participative changing processes that are taking place within the contemporary city and the artistic practices that proliferated during the 50’s and 60’s, being both of them experiences where making and showing prevail over telling or knowing.

One of the clearer statements that can be made about public space in our uniformed globalized cities is that it consists of events. Space is no longer designed, but used. The value of a space relies on its potential to provide collective or individual experiences. As Rem Koolhaas (1994) states ‘The Generic City is sociology, happening.’

Although Allan Kaprow (1958) coined the term ‘happening’ in his text about Jackson Pollock’s work within an artistic context, he jet claimed for it a condition of ordinariness in strong relation with common life: ‘Not only will this bold creator show us, as if for the first time, the world we have always had about us but ignored, but they will disclose entirely unheard-of happenings and events’. During the 50’s and 60’s, a whole new approach to art took place, one in which the locus was displaced from the object to the process. Making and perceiving occurred at the same space-time lapse. Happenings made the private process of art-making public and performative.

In order to emphasize the value of the action itself, these practices establish an instantaneous relation between knowledge and act. But they are not like the activity of the technician, where knowing
(command) and doing (execution) are separate. Neither can they be subjected to the end-means technical structure of events. It is impossible to predict the final result of the action appealing to a collection of examples of past events, or even correct or revoke the process, since it is usually not repeated in time. Knowledge itself emerges during the performance, and it is valuable not because it has been thought, but because it has been done.

In this sense, gestures can be read as the minimal necessary act to create space. This time, it is not about space between objects (walls or buildings) but between parts of the body. When talking about public space, couldn’t it be also understood as space between bodies?

Figure 1. Image on the back page of the review The Act, vol 2, nº1, Performance Project, Inc. ed. NY, 1990. (source of image:http://www.inventivity.com/PP) Figure 2. 366 Sillas, Maider López, urban event during La Noche en Blanco, Madrid, May 2007. (source of image: http://www.maiderlopez.com)

But a quick look at our public spaces reveals that this kind of interaction is not a by-default situation. It needs to be constructed and promoted. In some sense, suggested. While ‘performance’ seems to refer to a pure act where the body is the main material, the term ‘installation’ alludes to a set of things arranged in space where the object plays the main role, not even needing people but to find the relation between these objects and the context in which they are displayed. It is at the intersection of these two actions, (to) perform and (to) install, and these two materials, the body and the object, that a true interaction within public space can be imagined.
As Robert Rosenberg (1957) pointed out, 'in turning to action, abstract art leaves its alliance with architecture, as painting had earlier broken with music and with the novel, and offers its hand to pantomime and dance'. Although this may be true, one of the most significant differences between art and theatre or dance performances is the relation between the action and the public. It can be either a relation of complete absence, as in Kaprow's assemblages, consisting on a mere integration of ordinary acts of daily life into other contexts; or an active participation, as in his environments, where people are committed to be almost co-authors of the work. In this sense, Yves Klein's Antropometries stand at an intermediate place between the classical scheme and the new structure provided by what has been labelled as Action Art. Some fancy dressed people go to see what some eccentric nude people have prepared for them, while the orchestra plays. They still remain at the terrain of spectacle. Nothing compared with the 'abusive involvement of the audience' that Sontag (1962) saw as the dramatic spine of the Happenings, which seemed to be 'designed to tease' them.

But, whether we agree with Sontag or not, the fact is that by the explicit invitation to the public to take part in the actions, experimental practices in the 60's turned art's appreciation into a collective experience. Seen as non-hierarchical structures, they provide an example in which individual thought steps back in favour of common knowledge, or even better, knowledge can not be achieved if not as a shared experience. The public itself is able to transform facts into public matters. Becoming public means therefore becoming relevant for others. And, isn't it precisely the same goal of the extensive collection of new small urban interventions in our cities: to render these spaces visible, to show that they matter? In his definition of 'experimental art', Kaprow (1997) points at this direction: 'experimentation involves attention to the normally unnoticed. (...) In other words, attention alters what is attended.' And unlike in Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, this alteration is something aimed.
authorship

Often, the value of art relies on the author's identity. In its aim to abolish the market rules, happenings blurred the importance of authorship, not even claiming for them the condition of work of art. 'When art is only one of the several possible functions a situation may have, it loses its privileged status and becomes, so to speak, a lowercase attribute' (Kaprow, 1971). This is also the case for new urban place-making strategies. Although they may use art techniques resembling performances and happenings, their defining attribute is not art but participation as a means to transform spaces.

The artist as the irreplaceable subject that conceives, generates and creates the work is debunked by the generalized 'I am' formula, which multiplies the author to its complete dissolution. Not by chance, Kaprow chose it for the metal buttons that everyone involved in the series of happenings called Gas on the summer of 1966 needed to wear. Resemblances with the famous *civit romanus sum* (I am a roman), which homogenised roman citizens in their civil rights, are obvious.


Figure 7-8. Depave events at Portland: Capitol Hill Elementary School. July 2011 and Frazer Garden, August 2011. photo: Eric Rosewall (source of images: http://depave.org)
objects

As a non commercial work, happenings tried to take art out of the museums. In order to avoid the creation of merchandise, they set up a special relation with objects. As Phelan (1992) argues 'the disappearance of the object is fundamental to performance; it rehearses and repeats the disappearance of the subject who longs always to be remembered'. But in their intention to leave no traces, performances and happenings have to face the problem of 'residual objects'.

The performance is the main thing, but when it is over, there are a number of subordinate pieces which may be isolated, souvenirs, residual objects. To pick up after a performance, to be very careful about what is to be discarded and what still survives by itself. Slow study and respect for small things. One's own created 'found objects.' The floor of the stage is like the street. Picking up after is creative. Also the particular life of objects must be respected. Oldenburg, C., 1962

Very frequently objects are literally constructed and/or destructed during the performance. Burning, melting, eating, etc..., these actions emphasize the ephemeral condition of the event. Even installations, which usually give leadership to the object and its materiality, change their strategy when they step out into the urban space, where they are advocated to be transitory. This may be the reason why low-cost at-hand materials are often employed, but not the only one. It is also possible to trace a discourse about recycling and sustainability that draws again our attention to consumerism and its fatal no-way-out cycle. This view of garbage as construction material denunciates institutional stagnation, cancelling the possibility of any economic alibi.

In both artistic or community managed actions, objects provide the opportunity for interaction. The object bears the symbolic charge. Its origin and final destiny are part of the plot.


Figure 10. Basurama & Darquia. Waste tires used to build street furniture. Intervention at Mocca Neighbourhood, Sao Paulo, Brasil, 2007 (source of image : http://basurama.org)
The disappearance of the object is particularly important in performance art. The obsessive ‘presentness’ of what is happening can only be falsely extended by auxiliary techniques as photography, video recording or written text. They become ‘betrayal objects’ at some extent, as they provide an access road to the ‘smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital’ (Phelan, 1992). But this is not the case for public space participatory practices. On the contrary, the power of these actions strongly relies on their exemplariness, so they need to be communicated and spread. In doing so, they create a sense of community, either virtual or real.

**plan**

There is a prevalent mythology about Happenings. It has been said, for example, that they are theatrical performances in which there is no script and “things just happen.” It has been said that there is little or no planning, control, or purpose. It has been said that there are no rehearsals. Titillating to some, the object of easy scorn to others, provocative and mysterious to a few, these myths are widely known and believed. But they are entirely false. Kirby, M., 1965, pp.9

Although there might not be a script in the classical sense of theatre or cinema, there are usually some indications given to the public equivalent to the instructions of an artefact to be used. In Kaprow's groundbreaking happening, presented at the Reuben Gallery in New York in the fall of 1959, the seventy-five members of the audience were handed programs and three stapled cards instructing them individually when to take a different seat, when to change cubicles and when to applaud or not. As Kaprow himself theorised:

I think that it is a mark of mutual respect that all persons involved in a Happening be willing and committed participants who have a clear idea of what they are to do. This is simply accomplished by writing out the scenario or score for all and discussing it thoroughly with them beforehand. In this respect it is not different from the preparation for a parade, a football
match, a wedding or religious service. It is not even different from a play. The one big
difference is while knowledge of the scheme is necessary, professional talent is not; the
situations in a Happening are lifelike or, if they are unusual, they are so rudimentary the
professionalism is actually uncalled for.

So spontaneity needs some preparation. Our behaviour in public spaces is relatively predictable, but
at least it has to be hypothesized, and therefore, planned. Even the simplest act of ordinary life, such
as making a purchase in a street market, implies a certain minimum of planning, as for example a
shopping list. This written disordered sequence of objects is then translated into rituals an gestures
that take into account the proximity between stands, the temperature and weight of the objects and of
course the people we encounter. All this movements are encompassed to each other creating a kind
of urban dance. The same happens during a meal on a table. As Le Corbusier (1930) noticed the
distance between the objects displayed on a table are 'the measure of life' or as Howritz & Singley
(2004) explain 'like the table itself, food stages events, congregating and segregating people, and food
becomes an architecture that inhabits the body'.

Figure 13. *Desyuno con Viandantes*, as part of the *Permanent Breakfast* project, at
Puente del mar, Valencia, February 20th 2010. photo: Biel Aliño (source of images:
http://elmundo.es) *Figure 14. Increasing disorder in a dining table*, drawing by Sarah

**words**

The city is the place of language. Not only spoken words are constantly uttered between people that
share the same space, but the city itself is the physical support for uncountable written words.
Hundreds of signs, nameplates and billboards make use of words in the public space, sometimes
trying to alter their normal perception with tantalizing intentions. Their purpose is merely functional, no
matter whether they indicate us the right direction or are complexly rooted in marketing effective
tactics.
However, the city has always been the beholder of other type of words. When dictated from below, these words express complaints in demonstrations, riots or strikes. They are not restricted to leave traces on the public space. They enact the social need and right to literally ‘take the floor’.

If we agree with Kirby (1965) that ‘happenings do have a nonverbal character’ and are actions in which ‘while words are used, they are not used in the traditional way and are seldom of primary importance’, then one would expect the coincidental territory between action art and urban practices to be of limited extent. On the contrary, we find that the written word becomes a kind of silent substitute for the lack of speech during performances, and therefore establishes a similar relation between typography and physical objects as it comes about in the city. Words are placed right on top of the things they want to underline.

One of the most striking properties of the written word within public space is its permanent condition. The act of writing is inevitably an act of fixation, and the strength of the strategy resides exactly at this contrast between the changing course of events and the stillness of the message. When talking about advertising, a passerby may not even notice its presence if not by some movement implemented by external means. The phenomena of ‘human directionals’ or ‘spinners’, that has become typical of real state advertising in Southern California, is an example of the market’s need to set the words in motion in order to be perceived by the public. But, for performance art and urban actions, there is also a different way of catching the eye: simultaneously changing the message and preserving the publicity aesthetics. That is, to appropriate and interrogate structures of advertisement.

Indeed, these structures often do the contrary. They appropriate private spaces where, appealing to their temporary condition, they camp at ease. In her re-interpretation of Kaprow’s Yard 1961 installation, Sharon Hayes’ work at the Marble Cemetery evoked the American archetype of the suburban yard, a private domain that is nevertheless often filled with public signs, notably for political campaigns and real estate sales.
So we find two operational features in relation to words in the public space. One is the meaning, the other is the context. The first moves away from the classical non-sense sequence typical of happenings, where as Kirby (1965) points, things ‘do not relate to each other in any logical way: they exist in simultaneous compartments’. The second, instead, shoots directly at the centre of contemporary art’s bull’s-eye.


**Politics**

With his famous statement: ‘*An action is not a matter of taste*’, Harold Rosenberg (1952) drew a new map of the relations between art and aesthetics. Radically, he placed Action Art out of the cultural cannons of beauty and ugliness, and also out of the critical circuit that determines the value of a work of art. Actions are simply done. Of course we can give an aesthetical interpretation for them, but their existence does not depend on it.

As it has been recently marked by the Uruguayan artist Clemente Padín it is a common place in critical debates that street art Performs an ‘aestheticization of politics’. But this well known Benjaminian formula seems to him an inexact way of saying that ‘it assumes the aesthetical instances of politics and tries to direct them towards their creators’ (Padín, C., 2011). Actions seek, therefore, the delegitimation of apparent normalities. The question of what ‘normality’ should be, becomming an intrinsic part of the political action itself.
In his interpretation of the relation between art and politics, Jacques Rancière identifies artistic egalitarianism as analogous to the breaking down of real social and political hierarchies. Politics consist on the struggle for equal recognition in the established order, in what he calls the 'distribution of the sensible' (le partage du sensible).

Politics revolve about what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. It is on the basis of this primary aesthetics that it is possible to raise the question of aesthetic practices as I understand them, that is forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community. Artistic practices are ways of ‘doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of ‘doing and making’ (…)


So, in the same way that what is spectable stands on the basis of art perception, artistic practices have also the ability to change the very limits of what can be spected to occur. And going beyond these limits implies always a certain kind of violence. Climbing up a lamppost, in an attempt to break out of the predetermined pattern of movement within urban space, will surely end in an arrest by the police. To wield a banner on the street, even with the simpler descriptive slogan, automatically claims authority's attention.

Performances and Happenings possess this quality of embarrassing reality in a high degree. In their struggle to unveil the boundaries of what is considered to be the normal state of things, they explore reality in its political sight, and is there a more politically charged place than urban space?


Figure 20. Sharon Hayes, photo from the project In the Near future, New York, 2009. (source of image: http://www.shaze.info)
Although in their primitive origins these artistic techniques refused to have any meaning, their further development has inevitably encountered it in relation to the socio-political context in which they arise. Urban actions have understood this circumstance and have used it instrumentally resulting in a very special bottom-up strategy.

**(to) play**

Most of the time we spend in public space we are just moving from one place to another. The linear configuration of the public space *par excellence*, the street, favours this kind of use. But there was a time when it was not filled up with cars at any time and other activities could take place. Even today, a momentary elimination of the automobile provokes and promotes a whole new range of communitary uses with playing and gaming as the first and most innocent substitutes.

![Figure 21. Arthur Leipzig, Chalk Games, New York, 1940. (source of image: http://arthurleipzig.com). Figure 22. NY Times Square pedestrianised (source of image: http://www.intersticearchitects.com/blog/)](image)

When man is defined as *homo ludens* it is said clearly that his ability to play is as innate as his survival instinct. And nowhere is this assertion more justified than in our globalized city landscapes, where playing may be the last bastion of emotional interaction. The encounter with otherness is thus an essential aspect of the play experience. Indeed, playing is just ‘a medium where lived experience is organized as a structured situation’ (Huizinga, 1938). A wide interpretation of these words would say that any event can be read as a game if it takes place in a a structured situation, which leads to Kaprow's declaration that ‘the playground for experimental art is ordinary life’ as a twin-argument.

But here we must point out the crucial difference in the English language between playing and gaming. As Kaprow has explained ‘gaming involves winning or losing a desired goal. Playing is open-ended and, potentially, everybody wins.’ (Kaprow,1997). We could also add another clue: playing is an action, a verb, there is no noun for it. It comes to be in the doing of it. Instead, the game is freestanding. It exists prior to its gaming.
Although there are fundamental differences, activation of public space can be achieved at some intersection between these two concepts. Installing a team game where it is not expected to be can explore the coexistence of different structures in a urban context, that is, the juxtaposition of several structured situations, to use Huizinga’s words. Gaming in public space can lead to playing as a vital experience in our cities.

**conclusion**

Public, authorship, objects, plan, words, politics and play. We have delineated these categories to define an overlapping territory between experimental art formats such as happenings, performances and installations; and an emerging on-growing collection of urban activation practices that are waiting to be named. Of course they have also some divergences, but looking closely to their similarities can teach us something about the available techniques already explored by art to produce effects upon people’s lives. The last thing that can be said is: let’s just do it.
Silvia Colmenares Vilata (1974) is an architect by the Madrid Polytechnic ETSAM (1999) and scholarship at the IUAV (1997). Since 2001, she co-directs the architecture office Colmenares Vilata Arquitectos. She combines professional practice with teaching activity as an Architectural Design Associated Professor at the ETSAM, and research activity as a doctorate candidate and member of ARKRIT Research Group for the Architectural Critic, where currently she is responsible for the SpanisPublicSpaces research project.

References

Books with up to four authors:


Book chapters:


Edited books:


Journal articles:


Website documents: