

*Primal beings in domesticated spaces*

## Introduction

In this thesis I wanted to dive in headfirst into my rising fascination with domestication of human behaviour and explore how politics and design of urban public spaces might be another form of modern domestication. I choose to examine the role of art and especially performance and the notion of performativity in relation to these topics in order to engage with my key question: can art and performative acts inspire change in our domesticated public spaces?

To help me navigate my rising questions, I engaged in conversation with:

- Dr. Willem R. Boterman, Senior Lecturer Urban Geography/Urban Studies, University of Amsterdam PhD Human Geography.
- Lectorate Art & Public Space (LAPS) at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. Lector Jeroen Boomgaard, together with Christie Bakker.
- Esther Polak, artist who together with Ivar van Bekkum form the artist duo PolakvanBekkum.

As well as engaging in research, articles, videos, books and papers on these topics.

Thank you all for indulging in my curiosity and offering your time.

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## Chapter one - are humans domesticated beings?

Tending to my garden, watching the grass grow, I am slowly enjoying the process of watering and weeding between the narrow beds of vegetables. It is a sunny day; I am watching the growth with care, spikes of green, shades and soil.

Yes, let's start with the grass.

I had a year-long flirt with a piece of grass. It started innocently as most things do. I got fascinated by a big square field, located in front of my window. It is primarily used as a dog training facility. Oh, and how I watched them train.

From over-excited puppies learning how to sit and walk, to eager, barking dogs sprinting through agility tracks on to the submissive, loyal, police dogs learning to track scents and how to sink their teeth into an arm, all while wagging their tails furiously doing a good job.

At first, I only focused my attention on the domestication of dogs in relation to humans. But the more I looked, the more I realized how the grass in itself is a highly domesticated species. And slowly I came to question how domesticated we as human beings are as well.

*I sit and watch the grass being cut as a performative act<sup>1</sup>. I sit and watch it being cut down in long, even pieces, creating a striped pattern across the field. Every time the mower reaches the end of a row, it turns around in a precise motion, perfected by practise, and slowly the lawn comes into being through this repeated act of maintenance.*

In the permaculture classes I have been attending I learned that grass is one of the earliest stages of succession. Their roots spread easily by diverting, but they do not go very deep. Keeping shallow, the roots grow fast. Called invasive by one or by another, lovingly, called practical.

And we cut it. If we did not cut it, it would grow, become bushy, become habitat and nature's way would slowly turn it wilder, eventually turn it into forest.

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<sup>1</sup> A performative act being the concept that actions of life can be viewed as daily performances which activates spaces. Concepts build on John Austin's speech theories and Judith Butlers gender-act theories I will dig deeper into later.

But we cut it.

If we wanted to nurture the soil, we would leave the grass on the field as dead organic matter, but as it often is, it is cut and it is collected. There is an aesthetic approach at play in keeping the grass short. I doubt whether it necessarily serves any other function than looking 'neat'.

You can buy grass on a roll and use it at your convenience.

At websites, you can browse seeds for every type of lawn that you desire.

What about the Quality hard wearing lawn seeds - perfect for the busy family with 80% amenity perennial ryegrass, 15% strong creeping red fescue and 5% smooth-stalked meadow grass, or maybe the Shady place lawn mix is more for you with 27% amenity perennial ryegrass, 55% strong creeping red fescue, 10% slender creeping red fescue, 5% smooth-stalked meadow grass and 3% highland bent?

Isn't that fascinating?

It is marked as one of the major shifts in the history of humankind:

- the domestication of grass. How we transformed, carefully nurtured and selected certain grasses through centuries and made it into grains and food crops for human consumption and animal feed, is speculated by researchers to be the beginning of modern agriculture.

And so, the common cultivated lawn grass shares the same botanical family, name Poaceae, as the wild grasses we now know as rice, wheat, barley, corn, millet and oats.<sup>2</sup>

According to professor of Biology Mary-Dell Chilton at Washington University in St. Louis, domestication of plants and animals is the most significant development of the last 10.000 years<sup>3</sup>. By way of domestication, evolution allows for genetic variations to occur, and it can change a species' whole morphology, simply in the process of choosing some traits over others. This has proven to impact physical appearance as well as behaviour of species. Some changes as intended, others a

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<sup>2</sup> Phillip E. Jardine, William D. Gosling, Barry H. Lomax, Adele C. M. Julier, and Wesley T. Fraser, Chemotaxonomy of domesticated grasses: a pathway to understanding the origins of agriculture, page 83-84.

<sup>3</sup> Dell Chilton: *An Evolutionary Journey through Domestication*, online lecture recorded October 10 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cOMEwySIY4&t=176> accessed 28:02:22.

coincidental consequence of selection. For instance, in the domestication and breeding of specific fruits, certain species have now become unable to pollinate on their own and therefore completely dependent on human interaction. Or as seen in breeding of domesticated animals, where in selection for tameness visual appearance changes with it, creating floppy ears or makes spots appear in fur patterns.

But what I find particularly interesting is that while domesticating other species and transitioning the way we lived, we humans as a species also went through change s and a domestication most likely impacting us more than we are aware of. Human behaviour must have developed alongside and so in successfully domesticating other beings, we also successfully domesticated ourselves. In this transit we must have changed both physiologically and behaviourally into the human beings that are now able to live in highly organised modern societies.<sup>4</sup> And into modern society we have now grown attached to the structures of urban cities, so deeply that it is now hard to imagine human existence without them. But we are still animals with deep emotional and animalistic urges. Urges that are not always welcome in the urban jungles we live in. Urban jungles where there are social norms and values to be followed and boxes to fit into and where public display of raw emotion is associated with embarrassment or disgrace.

A city has its own ecosystem. Every action has a reaction and when you build something here, or add a sign there, it has consequences to the behaviour around it. So, when it was made forbidden to smoke outside of a school, the students simply found the back alley with the bridge connected to it, as a new social space to hang out. A piece of public space with the (ever changing) freedom that it offers.'

*I observe with vague curiosity a group of teenagers sitting on a bridge forming small clusters of interaction. They lump together in small packs with quilted jackets to protect themselves from the cold Amsterdam breeze, lighting their cigarettes in small acts of rebellion.*

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<sup>4</sup> Jackson, Fatimah, *How plants Domesticated Humans*, online lecture recorded December 4, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwtBBTVDFsk&t=2s>, accessed 28:02:22

Sometimes it feels as if urban cities, our cities, are not meant for people to hang out in anymore. It feels as though the focus of attention has shifted over decades and modern cities are now closer designed to keep people away, almost aggressively signalling us to not get too comfortable. To keep people moving and at a steady pace too.

We should have more benches to watch the world from.

I believe there is overlooked importance in the act of sitting, social value in hanging out and power in everyday recurring acts. Especially if those acts take place in public spaces, where some of these acts can be viewed as both disturbing and problematic - or as small acts of resistance.

The public space has become a returning interest for me: the space in between private and public, human interaction, social behaviour and the performative element of activating spaces with the body. The idea that you can take space and shape it with your existence is so beautiful to me.

And I am fascinated by the idea of change.

What if it is possible to create an edge, to break a pattern or even for a small instance interrupt everyday life in hope of creating something new.

Can art and performative acts create change in our domesticated public spaces?

In the following chapters I will explore this question by first investigating what public space is and its ever-evolving problematics. Then I will look closer at arts function out in the public sphere, and to speculate on what makes a good public artwork.

Further in my research I will turn towards performance theories and question if performative interactions can help us perceive public spaces differently.

## Chapter two - getting to know privatized public space and its problematics:

I don't remember when my interest in public space began. Maybe it was always there. As far back as I can remember I have had a love and curiosity for people and, as soon as I could, I started to hang out after school in squares. I would buy small ice creams with my allowance and just sit and exist in order to watch the world move around me. I would spend hours in the public library reading, spending a day drawing alone at a café, going swimming at the public pool by myself and afterwards I would hang out with ladies of all ages in the sauna. I recall the joy of going window-shopping, of trying on ten different outfits and leaving without buying anything more than a lip-balm with fragrance of synthetic berry, the rush of shoplifting candy in supermarkets and the comfort of talking with volunteers in charity shops.

Often when I would arrive somewhere new, I would make up a rule to visit every shop in a whole street, just to look, to eat with my eyes and feast on the seemingly endless sensualities they promised.

And I would claim spaces, mark them as mine in my conscious and come back to them on a regular basis for comfort, or as a ritual to care for it as I felt it cared for me. I still do and I'm not alone. When I talk to others I learn of favourite bridges, trees, beaches or sculptures to meet under, their preferred nail salons, bars or their structured habit of going to the same market every Saturday to greet the same people at the same stands. It gives a sense of calm and offers a very important aspect of public space; to be able to fill them and claim them as part of your existence.

I have gradually become more and more aware of the ever-evolving aspects of public spaces, and the problems they also hold in terms of power, communication, commercialisation, equality and diversity in what is called politics of public space. In theory, public space is a space for everyone to enjoy on an equal basis, but I know that ideal is often not the reality. They can be seen as welcoming, repulsive or dangerous depending on who and where you ask.

When I asked professor Jeroen Boomgaard, lector at Lectorate for Art & Public Space (LAPS) at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Of what he viewed as a public space, he defined it as an open, yet controlled space. Especially in the Dutch society he points out this control as a tendency to over-design. As he states that *"The moment you design something it become less public, and so in over- designing spaces they*



*become even less public*". In Boomgaards eyes there is a common notion that public space is a space where people meet, but he is not convinced, as he exclaims, not without humour – *"I never meet anyone!"*.

According to him public spaces are places where you can observe other practices and where you are aware that it is not your space alone, since you have to share it with people that you disagree with. In that mindset public space is also a place for conflict and should play an important role in that aspect.

This goes hand in hand with the conversation I had with Dr. Willem Boterman on a rainy Wednesday afternoon. We were drinking beer at CREA, a bar in the University area full of students as Willem Boterman is a senior lector at Urban Geography and Urban Studies at University of Amsterdam. We were talking about politics of public space and exchanging thoughts on how the idea of public space has evolved as well as the current problems that it is facing.

Afterwards I read the paper *The Politics of Public Space* where different writers take on the task of addressing inequality and privatization of public areas in America which they claim is creating segregation and monocultures of living. They state that *"Public space is no longer, if they ever were, democratic places where a diversity of people and activities are embraced and tolerated. Instead, they have become centres of commerce and consumption, as well as places of political surveillance."*<sup>5</sup>

They encourage the reader to look closer and to observe with a critical mind the connections between public space, politics and cultural economy.

In Amsterdam as well, I observe this development of how private interest takes over public spaces.

By increasing security, surveillance and guards to ensure safety, it at the same time makes sure that only a desired part of the public get access<sup>6</sup>. In a twist of intention, such safety initiatives can increase inequality and segregate neighbourhoods, for the question becomes; safe for whom? For instance, keeping homeless away with tools such as using aggressive architecture<sup>7</sup> or restrictive laws. It does not seem very safe

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<sup>5</sup> Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, p. 80

<sup>6</sup> Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, p. 83

<sup>7</sup> Aggressive architecture is an urban design strategy of designing public aspects of cities, so they become uninviting for certain demographics. An example is placing arms leans in the middle of benches to prevent people from laying down on them, or simply using human psychology to make people stay away from areas by making them appear unfriendly.

or friendly in my eyes, as these acts only seem to exist to keep a certain marginalized demographic out of sight for the larger public eye.

Do you know that it is illegal to sleep outside in Amsterdam? If you sleep on a bench the police can make you leave or even arrest you. It was a part of a regulation passed in 2006 addressing homelessness in the four biggest cities in the Netherlands called the G4 Homelessness Action Plan.

And although the intentions were good - to help people off the streets and offering them solutions and help, I think there is something fundamentally wrong with the message it sends as a city. To forbid people to sleep in public is such a simple act, and largely done in the name of care, but the fact is that there is still increasing homelessness in Amsterdam. Now they are just kept comfortably out of mind and out of sight to please a certain group of citizens, for tourist and as part of the city's public image.<sup>8</sup>

Since when did the main point of public spaces become looking good in pictures? Even landscape aesthetics function as a suburban politics of exclusion<sup>9</sup> often referred to as making everything 'nice' taken from the concept of the 'smooth city' by René Boer, who works as a critic, curator and organizer in and beyond the fields of architecture, art, design and heritage.

Boer comments on a city where everything becomes a part of a strict structure and system appearing smooth but leaves out marginal spaces: "*This makes the smooth city increasingly homogeneous, unequal, anti-urban and violent towards any non-normative presence.*"<sup>10</sup>

And so creating public spaces that function as "*over-priced commodities*" as Boer puts it in the article *Appropriating Amsterdam: against the smooth city* from 2021, where he sees the positive function of squatting as a re-action to the smooth city, but an act which is getting increasingly more difficult in the current developments of Amsterdam. I see this as a great loss of culture and diversity of the Urban city because, as Boomgaard puts it, without space to fill in, spaces tend to become places and in

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<sup>8</sup> Hermans, Koen *The Dutch Strategy to Combat Homelessness*, p. 101-104 and 116

<sup>9</sup> Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, p. 87

<sup>10</sup> Boer, René: *Appropriating Amsterdam*, online article published 13 January 2021, <https://www.architectural-review.com/buildings/housing/appropriating-amsterdam-against-the-smooth-city>, accessed 28:02:22.

that process lose their identity, turning generic and without dimensions.

The thing is that I don't believe such decisions were all made from the intention of exclusion, but the fact remains that they cater to a very specific, more desired, public. Politic acts like gentrification over time increase social and economic segregation, slowly making areas into homogenized monocultures of social groups instead of a diverse social community.

I got recommended the article named *Domesticated by Cappuccino or a Revenge on Urban space? Control and empowerment in the Management of Public Spaces* written by Rowland Atkinson, Professor in the department of Urban Studies and Planning at University of Sheffield. In this paper some of these topics are discussed with the focus on how problems in cities are dealt with and how issues often end up implementing policies as a reaction to both real, but also perceived problems. In politics, Atkinson states, there has been a focus on 'securing' public spaces, but these attempts often end up displacing social problems rather than resolving the issues on a deeper level. Unfortunately, by implementing certain initiatives as quick fixes they can induce the opposite effect and make a specific group feel stigmatised. Projections and stereotypes increase problems and cause conflicts. For what does safety look like? Increasing police in an area to make it safer can ironically increase uneasiness of citizens by their presence in the neighbourhood<sup>11</sup>.

Deciding through laws who is a troublemaker or not can also influence people's image of themselves. If someone gets told that they don't fit in, they quickly conclude that something must be wrong with them creating feelings of isolation by society. At worst it can be a self-fulfilling prophesy. If you start to see yourself as a troublemaker and feel that society labels you that way too, why not just make trouble?

It's clear to tell that public spaces have and are still undergoing changes. The boundaries of what is private and public have become more blurry, greatly influenced by privatization and other neo-liberal practices which have transformed the public space and placing it back in corporate or commercial hands.<sup>12</sup>

The solution is as complicated as the issues, but by the end of my conversations and

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<sup>11</sup> Atkinson, Rowland, *Domestication by Cappuccino*, p. 1833

<sup>12</sup> Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, p. 82

research I know for sure that what urban cities need is not more privatization. Instead, there should be an aim to de-gentrify cities, include space and design gaps for minorities and space for diversity.

As I mentioned earlier, I believe a city has its own ecosystem and in order for an ecosystem to stay healthy it needs many types of people to perform many types of functions, to create and strengthen communities in order to be sustainable and to better support frictions.

There is a hidden power in social value and a poetry that lives in everyday acts and repetitions. If I were to sit on the same bench every day, I would create a daily routine that would eventually become a habit. I would add to the space, activating it with my presence, and slowly become part of the space itself. In a matter of weeks, I would know everyone who walks by my bench, and they would know me, creating an organic social impact; a value that is hard to measure and even harder to reproduce by force.

*I see the icons of Amsterdam, the three xxx's in the distance, indicating a tunnel for the metro. Graffiti colours its surface as the only act of personal expression in a centre of... nothing really.*

*I am visiting a public square.*

*A place where doves out-number the people and no one greets me other than an older lady with short hair in a red jacket asking for change. I shake my head and say 'sorry' before I am even aware that I am doing it. In response her gesture becomes frozen, smile stiffens as her hand stops in its waving motion, still.*

*Coughing in the distance, ladies are smoking sitting in niqab with crumbs for the waiting masses; the doves, truly faithful, they approach me too as soon as I sit down on a clear blue bench, surrounded by bright yellow blocks.*

*Never mind I have no crumbs to feed the hungry , dogs or children sometimes stir the crowd and I lean back on my bench aggressively full of armrests listening to the traffic rush of highway A10.*

*An older man nods as he passes by with his rollator, that keeps him moving, sliding, bumping, wheels turning foward, as I observe a small gathering outside a pizza, pasta & panini snack-bar while the sun kisses my cheeks on this cold November day. A girl crosses the Dead Sea, which is the center of this plaza. She is wearing bunny ears and a grin holding dead flowers that she uses to scrape away at white-grey clumps of dove shit.*

*I am not here to buy my time and so I move on.*

*Around the corner I am met with a row of benches all facing a gated field of well- trimmed grass; kept perfectly still and only available to the eyes.*

### Chapter three - art and its role in public space:

After my talk with Jeroen Boomgaard he handed me his essay-book *Wild Park – commissioning the unexpected* in which he discusses arts place in the public sphere. It became the starting point for my own thoughts as I continued to question what functions art serve out in public spaces?

There is a long, rich history of artworks in public, from commissioned to imperialism to current times where the notion still lingers that art in public is used to ‘conquer’ spaces. The final touch when a new plaza is opened is still, to this day, a piece of art<sup>13</sup>.

Officially, art in public spaces is supposed to represent the common good but it can come to act as a mask of private interest. The commission of a public work is a complex political process. Deciding what is suited or not, placement and aesthetics. And it is simply impossible to know exactly how the work is received by the actual users of the public space, who often don’t get to have an opinion before the artwork has been placed.

There are many examples of conflicts of space. Just the placement can create tensions, because art works in public, simply by existing carries the power of a government’s authority. To some people a public artwork symbolises an elitist art world, not all citizens feel resonates with their own personal identities.<sup>14</sup>

So, to have something placed so boldly in one’s neighbourhood could be seen as an insult, especially if the placement of it ruins a beloved former open spot which could have attachments to a person or a community.

- All this without taking in the potential political statements the artwork might be associated with.

I don’t think the fact that there is a disagreement is a problem, rather ideally conflicts can make way for healthy discussion and a base for action in a functioning democracy. What I have come to agree with from my talks and research is that public spaces are also spaces for conflicting practices and so should have room for disagreements and negative emotions. Rather, it fails when there is no attempt or room for discussion at all.

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<sup>13</sup> Boomgaard, Jeroen, *Wild Park*, p. 25

<sup>14</sup> Boomgaard, Jeroen, *Wild Park*, p. 28-29

This could be why there is this strong notion these years that public art works need to challenge the socio-political status quo and be critical as well as activist in order to be considered 'good'. A topic Gerard Drosterij, a freelance political philosopher, columnist and former researcher at Tilburg School of Law, addresses in the chapter *Art and public space* in the publication *High-rise common ground, art and the Amsterdam Zuidas Area*. Drosteij challenges the notion that an artist needs to be activist and political in creating public work.

In Gerard Drosterij's arguments he goes through several descriptions of art linked with the tasks of challenging the system but ends with his own strong opinion that art inherently should not have the responsibility, neither forced, to be political. Drosterij writes that art should be free from questioning its position regarding political issues or at least not concern itself so much with solving current issues as to contemplate and imagine. He argues for a non-political conception of public space, so that publicness is in no way automatically political. He would like to see the public space as a truly free space for the individual to express themselves in.

Art in Drosterij's view relates to human beings' particular reflection on aspects of existence that cannot be put into a scientific language. And so, he calls for a civil publicness where people are independent from political or social imperatives. In order to experience art, there needs to be a certain space and openness to not understand in order to enable other new ways of viewing the world. In a certain sense when artworks does not push or project opinions onto the onlooker, there can be created a possibility to discuss almost everything<sup>15</sup>. This strikes me as an important key understanding, reminding me of my conversation with Jeroen Boomgaard, where he philosophised on the beautiful power of art. In Boomgaard's eyes, art speculates on another world, another image or as an idea that can serve as a form of utopia to keep humanity moving forward. In an artwork there needs to be an element of hope and so in creating an element of another world one can feel free to fabulate on other ways of living - and maybe change oneself in the process.

These reflections on art are both extremely refreshing to me but in some ways also appear a bit naive. In a very active and activist art scene I find it hard to remain politically objective and create art just for art's sake without taking in what is currently

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<sup>15</sup> Drosterij, Gerard, *Highrise*, Chapter 7, *Art and public space*, p 176

happening in the world around me. There is undoubtedly also a power in using one's platform to convey a message, the question is how to use this voice in a conscious way that does not take from the artwork but instead adds to it in a poetic manner. So ideally in a public artwork there should be room for the artist's own interpretations as well as room for ambiguity, in order to allow an audience to experience the work in as many individual ways as possible and not to be forced in a specific direction.

In the end, public space is what people *do there* and is in theory created simply through activation. Which opens up the intriguing possibility that public space is not fixed, and one can *create* the space just by the way one chooses to interact with it.

#### **Chapter four - Public performance as playful and powerful interactions:**

To continue this exciting thought of creating public space by activating it, I want to look closer at artworks as public or social interactions, bearing the name of performances. The act of using one's body to communicate, create connections, question or highlight aspects of existence is to me an impactful and beautiful tool when used in the public sphere. So, when I was first introduced to the artist Sophie Calle, it was something like an epiphany. An opening into topics and methods I had tried to implement and create work with, but I had struggled to describe.

Sophie Calle has become known for mixing her personal life with the larger world, making works around concepts of curiosity; such as asking for secrets to bury, collecting stories brought to her in a hotel bed, trying to capture what people saw before they became blind and stopping trucks in a highway-booth to ask drivers where they could potentially take her<sup>16</sup>. I feel this type of artworks can be compared to aspects of anthropology or sociology as it directly involves observations of human behaviour, collecting information based on hypotheses of what might happen, together with exploring various boundaries of social interactions. Where it differentiates is in the strong subjectivity of the artist, who, as a firm anchor, keeps the

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<sup>16</sup> Calle, Sophie, *Sophie Calle: And so forth*



work centred. Calle relies on other people to indulge her curiosities, but the interactions are always translated through her in photos, videos, writings or objects which becomes stories and collections. This translation being crucial for the making of an artwork. The idea of public interaction transcending into something else, becoming the tools and material, attracts me deeply.

The power to me also lies in the way interactions are not too forcefully directed. This lightness or playfulness allows for the ever-wanted room for coincidence, almost asking for interruptions and seems to simply respond directly to human behaviour. This way there are no wrong answers or unwanted outcomes as everything becomes part of the work and is accepted as such.

There is a power in the freedom of being an artist. In my conversation with Professor Willem Boterman, he highlighted this freedom as fundamental, as an artist gets the liberty of testing theories and to go beyond borders, which ethically can be hard for others to cross or to even question.

To dare to interact, to disrupt the public in order to create it anew.

It can be as simple as asking strangers for directions in a big city, famously done by the anonymous artist Stanley Brouwn in his conceptual work *this way brouwn*<sup>17</sup>.

The gesture of asking strangers for direction and letting them mark down their lines and arrows is such a simple way to interrupt everyday life and create a small study of human interaction. In the repetition and meticulous collection of altering answers the action becomes amplified, humorous, poetic or absurd. And because there are only the artefacts left presented, - the drawings with the stamps, there is left space for us to use our imaginations and fill in the blanks, creating our own visions to reflect on. Performative interactions such as this can potentially alter the way we look at the street, creating a space of possibility.

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<sup>17</sup> Artist Stanley Brouwn collected directions from pedestrians between 1960-1964 in Amsterdam, marking each interaction with the stamp 'this way brouwn'.

## Chapter five - Exploring performance theories:

In this chapter, I want to explore the term performance and the theories relating to it, in the hope of making it more clear what performance and performativity can be and my position to certain performance theories.

When I look up performance online there are four key factors which are stated to make up a performance: time, space, body and presence - of the artist and the relation between the creator and the public. Or: presence, subversion, relationality and presentation as Camilla Jalving<sup>18</sup> puts it in her book *Artwork as action - performativity, art and method*, where she aims to analyse performativity theories and their possibilities in regards to our times changing perceptions<sup>19</sup>.

*Presence* refers to the ever-present time factor and the notion of the authentic being an important factor for the impression of the performance.

*Subversion* is the term to describe the ungraspable element of the 'pure' performance. That it does not make itself into an object and only exist in that moment, gives the performance an invisible power. It can thus be seen as a rebellion by not giving in to the object-oriented art marked or culture. Or, as in other theories, seen as form of liminality existing in-between and breaching into ritualistic aspects and anthropology.

*Relationality* covers the inclusion of the viewer described as an almost theatrical tension created between the performer and the audience. It's about the space created and what it does to the person who is presented to the work. The viewer becomes a part of the work and so can intervene, act and react.

*Presentation*, being the last part of the definition, is the aspect that the performance is not about what is being *presented* but what is being *done*. A performance should

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<sup>18</sup> Camilla Jalving is an art historian, critic and the deputy director for Collections, Research and Conservation at SMK in Copenhagen.

<sup>19</sup> Jalving, Camilla, *Artwork as action*, p. 33-34

not represent or be a direct reference to something, but the meaning of the action is to be found in the act itself and the physical relationship between the artist and the onlooker. In that moment it can become the catalyst of new relations.

In the vast world of performance theories and as a performer myself, I have sometimes struggled with the definitions of these elements, especially the aspect of time or presence.

The performance theorist Peggy Phelan, American feminist scholar, holds a famous saying that "*Performance's only live in the present. Performance cannot be saved recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of presentation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance*"<sup>20</sup>

Stating that the performance is only for that brief moment, that it can't be performed again and that you would have to be there, to be present in that exact point in time and space. To record it or document it in any way would for Phelan be a betrayal of the activist, invisible power that a performance holds which she argues in her powerful and controversial book *Unmarked, the politics of performance* first published in 1993.

But art and technology have moved to such an extreme today, or you could say have normalized to such a degree, that the screen now is an extension of our everyday realities. Recording moments of life and sharing it live is an acceptable social happening and has become an almost mundane normality.

And there is presence in the absence as well, I agree with the theorist Amelia Jones, who brings up the privilege of having-been-there, as she was simply not around to see the big performances that has shaped the genre. My first and only encounter has been through a representation of some sort, in video documentation or through artefacts. Or in the classic act of mouth to mouth re-telling of what has been or what had happened, creating depth in myths and fabulation. And these second-hand meetings with performances still manage to evoke powerful aesthetic experiences and leave lasting impressions. Jones even argue that performance need mediums in order to reach a higher experience<sup>21</sup>.

This topic of documentation also came up in my interview with Esther Polak, one half

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<sup>20</sup> Phelan, Peggy, *Unmarked*, p. 146

<sup>21</sup> Jalving, Camilla, *Artwork as action*, p. 234-235

of the artist duo PolakvanBekkum. The artist duo started working with mobility patterns in 2002 when GPS was a new technology, and by now they can't imagine a world without recorded social patterns. In Polaks eyes, it also offers unique opportunities to meet our own past and see more clearly the distinction that exists between memory and fantasy. And I agree. We all have tendencies to add on reality as we all have our own version of the truth, so simply being there does not equal that one grasped the full happenings of the event.

I share this notion that performance needs to be real to some extent. That one cannot plan every detail or perform as a theatre play.

There needs to be an edge, the room for the unexpected, that also echoes what we saw as something needed in the design for public space.

A performance is very vulnerable as it can be easily disturbed, but this vulnerability helps to create an exciting tension between the artist and the onlooker. And this tension I believe can be recorded, although I agree with Peggy Phelan that it will never be the same and an attempt of capturing a performance exactly as it took place is simply impossible. Each time it will be re-presented, it will gain another layer of reference that will make it evolve, which I don't view to be an inherent negative aspect. Because what the artist have control over is the manner of what and in which way the performance is documented. And in this choice I see another possibility for creation.

In artist Ana Mendieta *Siluetas* series, we are presented with images capturing silhouettes in the shape of installations, manipulations and leftovers of performative interferences. The feminine silhouettes are mostly framed in relation to land and created in such a way that they will inevitably disappear, leaving only the trail of images behind<sup>22</sup>.

Although Ana Mendieta's silhouettes were meant to be temporary engravings or sculptures, they are forever imprinted through the medium. Continuing to create powerful impacts, her shapes carved themselves into the world and into our consciousness. And so, the visible can be highlighted by the invisible and something temporary can be forever engraved making the remains more powerful in the absence of the real.

Making choices in the documentation process gives the artist another opportunity to shape the work that can create another layer of meaning or sharpen the experience of

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<sup>22</sup> Ana Mendieta sculpture, painter, performance and video artist created this project between 1973-1978 with over 200 silhouettes in all captured in different stages of deterioration.

the piece. Thus, a performance can be manipulated or translated into artefacts, installations or happenings around the act of re-telling through transformation.

In my idea of performance there needs to be an element of control, of choice, but also an element of chaos. To leave room for the unpredicted to interfere. Therefore, a main part of designing the interaction is for the artist to choose which factors to decide on and which other factors to remain open.

Performative un-framed acts, especially in public spaces, can easily be seen as acts of madness as it can be hard for a public audience to decipher the intentions.

A certain framework can be needed in creating a structure, almost to create a 'contract' with the observer. Then the artist can choose to play with that expectation and softly break it again. – *'Ah it is only a performance'. My world is not shaking, it is only an illusion, as a view into a parallel universe.*

## Chapter six - On the notion of performativity:

One of the most interesting aspects of performance to me comes alive in the word performativity. Performativity has been a powerful re-installment of a concept that was first introduced in the 1950's but started blooming in the 1990's and is still currently transforming into new exciting understandings especially linked to gender-theories<sup>23</sup>. Performativity to me is the concept that all public actions can be observed as performances. This plays into theories that a large part of the image we present outwards can be seen as something we choose, both consciously and subconsciously. And it plays into the notion I have of all public spaces: That we domesticated beings' step into roles in the public navigated through social norms that deeply shape the way we behave.

To observe happenings in public spaces as performative acts of existence that transform spaces into life, or as PolakvanBekkum puts it in their writings and work *The City as a Performative Object*: to "investigate possibilities towards the construction of 'flexible spaces' through the concept of the city (or landscape) as performative object."<sup>24</sup>

So, when I asked Esther Polak: what is performance is your eyes? She had a quite clear distinction between performance and performativity.

Polak sees performance as something related to representation, almost as a tool performance is used to represent something real.

The performative is something that adds to the world. As Esther Polak sees it, the performative represents aspects of the real, but in during so creates something new and builds on top of the current world. Not necessarily to add to the world, but to offer another way, almost as a parallel reality that is neither better nor worse than the existing one.

As PolakvanBekkum they build these definitions with their own reflections on theories by philosopher John Austin from his book *How to do things with words* from 1962. In

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<sup>23</sup> Jalving, Camilla, *Artwork as action*, p. 53 - 66

<sup>24</sup> PolakvanBekkum, *The City as Performative Object*, p. 2

short, John Austin's speech-act theories are about the difference between language that represents and language that performs. In situations where words gain actual power of change, he called it; 'performative utterances' or 'a performative'. In this way of distinguishing between performative and performance there is given the example of the marriage ceremony where the words 'I do' can create something new, in the performative act of officially getting married, or be performed as a representation of the real by actors in a theatrical setting.

In their work PolakvanBekkum implement these aspects with philosopher JudithButler's feminist gender-act theories, which is in short, the notion that we as humans create our own gender identities through repeated and stylized acts on a subconscious level. But also, the freedom and agency it can create in realising these patterns, which gives the option to break them and re-create one's identity<sup>25</sup>.

In their work *The City as a Performative Object*, PolakvanBekkum takes these theories and applies them onto the public sphere with the hypothesis that things need to be created by daily performative acts in order to exist, arguing that everything that moves in the public sphere is a part of the performative space. Looking at the street with that concept they can claim that buildings, roads, design and architecture doesn't exist unless activated. To them it doesn't matter if it is true, but to see this concept as a playful experiment. To create the city by moving in it, observing with a newfound wonder and explore new alternative versions of the world through this new mindset.

This whole notion of performativity made quite an impact on me and my work when I was first introduced to it during an online workshop by PolakvanBekkum. In anthropology it is well known that culture is shaped through everyday performances; through acts, rituals and in ways of being<sup>26</sup>, but then to take that concept even further and play with the idea that they only exist if activated is extremely intriguing.

I started to look at the city in a different way, as I started to observe windows in the city as frames, bordering the barrier between me and the world that was constantly in an ongoing, never ending, performance.

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<sup>25</sup> PolakvanBekkum, *The City as Performative Object*, p. 5-6

<sup>26</sup> Jalving, Camilla, *Artwork as action*, p. 43

*I have been observing the windows surrounding me for some time.  
A window is a frame facing me; sometimes open other times shut, appearing  
friendly, aggressive, rejecting or even seducing when it is left half-open on a  
hook, giving me a glimpse.*

*The neighbourhood cats are performing for me daily: meowing, stretching  
and leaping between roofs.  
The street market performs for me too, with characters moving around as if it  
was scripted interactions.  
It has become a play and I expect them to do their part.*

*The balcony above me waters their flowers and by accident waters my balcony  
as well. A puddle builds up and evaporates like that, every day, as a  
continuum.  
Observing the street in this way makes the market seem slightly insane.  
Everyday performing the same acts, repeated as in one long breath.  
I talked with a guy who's been selling the same waffles for 8 years  
-“You just do, I guess”*



## Chapter seven - conclusion and what's next

To return to my question from the introduction, I still wonder if one can create change through the artistic act of interruption. In my conversations with Willem Boterman and Jeroen Boomgaard, I got inspired to think that art can make an impact, that the individual can inspire something that becomes collective.

*“The greatest rebellion is the act of sitting on the floor, ignoring benches, defying the planned environment in a gesture which questions the conventional discourse of space...”*<sup>27</sup> Disruption requires norms to break and the more homogeneous a society is the more norms there are to be disrupted.

When I first stumbled upon texts about politics of public spaces such as Rowland Atkinsons *Domesticated by Cappuccino* and David Harveys *The Right to the City*, I got inspired to go out and reclaim the streets. A strong urge to help facilitate change that I still feel. And I feel encouraged with the power of an artist, to be able to go out and act on these agencies. To break the patterns, to smash some plates and see what happens and to dare to disrupt where others might not. To find my way in the urban jungle and to be able to observe it all with an open curiosity. And to accept that we are domesticated animals, in domesticated environments, but that we are capable of change and in need of change in order to shape new ways of existence. And that we will change because we are living evolving beings, domesticating other species, and being domesticated in return.

I still believe there is a poetry living in public spaces, as there is poetry in mundane habits and everyday life. A bridge is a bridge is a bridge is a bridge; repetition strengthens the object, the act creating rhythm which then creates a new abstract meaning to appreciate. Let's interact with the mundane and to question its existence and structures. And approach it all with humour – in order to highlighting the absurdity of life.

Through art, observations and poetry, public spaces can become highlighted and

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<sup>27</sup> Atkinson, Rowland, *Domestication by Cappuccino*, page 1834 (Quote from R. Shields)

In this paragraph it is referenced to the Mall, but I believe this can be applied to over-designed urban public spaces in general.

more meaningful. In that freedom something beautiful can come into existence if we allow it and give space for the unexpected. Public performances still capture a specific time in a specific moment that might never exist again.

That notion makes me excited.

For a long time, I wanted to be the observer. For in a brief moment join someone else's reality and to play with the boundaries between public and private.

I used to want to be silent, but I have an increasingly urge to be seen.

To carve my existence into the grass, I feel an urge to claim corners and margins, to keep expanding on the idea of public spaces.

I want to break the silence, to be a nuisance and to exist with volume and intention.

I want to YELL to the world, to everyone and no-one and to myself.

Being noisy whispers with shame and is associated with being rude. It is linked to public image and being exceedingly noisy in public space is a sign that you are not able to control yourself.

It is embarrassing, looked down upon, and frowned at - the act of claiming shared space with one's presence and interrupt others' daily lives unnecessarily.

We should all be considerate of each other. Bow and nod our heads politely, proper and silent, efficient, content and well behaved.

One gets numbed by the city, tamed to fit in.

But we can't always be polite.

We are animals and the city is a jungle with its own ecosystem creating ripples and reactionary patterns. How can we come to terms with our primal emotions and urges in these highly domesticated environments?

I feel a need to make space for the human animal and its repressed urges.

To take that space, to be noisy and to be a nuisance in our domesticated cities.

To open up my vortex and YELL TO THE WORLD, to use up all of my voice and to feel my throat becoming sore in exhaustion - in a primal scream.

As the domesticated wild animal that I am.

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