



## II. THE CITY AND CULTURAL NARRATIVE

### FROM A “BLIND WALKER” TO AN “URBAN CURATOR”: INITIATING “EMOTIONALLY MOVING SITUATIONS” IN PUBLIC SPACES

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Reconstructing the mutation of a “blind walker” into the figure of reflexive urban activist, who proposes creative solutions to the problems of de-activated public spaces, urban art interventions are comprehended as a tool for re-inventing and revitalising urban settings while initiating intensive interaction and cooperation between citizens. The idea to arrange “emotionally moving situations” so as to activate reflexive attitude of the citizens toward everyday urban settings was proposed by situationists. By disturbing usual everyday rhythms and trajectories, urban art interventions, flash mobs and urban games establish a reflexive distance from the usual, routine “choreography” of the place and propose alternative scenarios of behaviour in public space. Therefore urban art interventions can be considered as a tool for creative reconceptualization of spatial structures and social order, embedded in urban space.

Keywords: emotional city-scape, bodily experience, situationism, urban art interventions, urban choreography, urban rituals.

#### Adjusting optics: from a “blind walker” to an “urban curator”

Starting with the notion of the city as a dynamic text, which, according to Michel de Certeau, is being written by citizens through their everyday practices (which are spatial *per se*) and which could be read by researchers (any reflexive agent who finds a way to establish a distance from the city), the question arises, how could a reflexive position toward the everyday urban surrounding be established? What are the conditions, in which “*two-way encounter between mind and city*” (Sheringham 1996: 111) happens? It is a question of developing spatially sensitive tactics for dealing with dynamically changing city as with a research object, that would allow exploring everyday practices, which shape urban spaces.

Certeau notices that normally citizens perceive the city while moving through an urban environment without seeing it:

“The ordinary practitioners of the city live “down below”, below the threshold at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the

city; they are walkers, *Wandersmanner*, whose bodies follow the thick and thin of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms” (Certeau 1988: 93).

For a moving body a city emerges as a configuration of obstacles and their absence, which influence the routes and the rhythms of the walker. These spatial configurations of obstacles (e.g. street curbs, dents, jaggies, puddles, etc.) shape the bodily experience of walkers, proposing better or worse moving conditions. This practical knowledge about the city is embedded in the spatial structures of the city. Certeau opposes this everyday experience of blind walking in the city to the totalizing perspective of “all-seeing eye”, which grasps an urban text seen all at one time. In this perspective a city is presented as integral system, or mechanism, the functioning of which could be planned and controlled. But paradoxically, this powerful spectator is also blind in sense that what he deals with is a representation of the urban life, a result of intensive processes, some of which are spontaneous and could not be reduced to a part of the regulated urban system. These two positions, one of the non-reflexive bodily experience and the other of totalizing look of all-seeing eye mark extreme coordinates, between which a search for reflexive position toward the urban experience takes place.

To suspend the everyday practical attitude, which enables citizens’ blindness toward the urban surroundings, a certain technique of “defamiliarization” (Viktor Shklovsky) with the everyday routine (which involves an instrumental attitude toward the surroundings) should be applied. A practice of *flânerie* (urban strolling), which was described by Charles Baudelaire and developed by Walter Benjamin, is exactly the method for establishing a sensitive approach to everyday city. At the first glance, a *flâneur* is an urban personage who passively follows the attractions of a city. He is led by curiosity: “for the flâneur, ‘there is always something to see’” (Benjamin 1999: 806), which needs to be stimulated, for example, by taking hashish (Benjamin 1986a). But the seeming passivity of the *flâneur* requires an intensive reflection of routine scenarios and existing symbolic orders that are embedded in urban space: while walking in the city the *flâneur* transcends everyday rhythms of work and leisure<sup>1</sup>, he invents new routes by disturbing existing urban trajectories of various social groups, and explores his own perception of the city; in this sense *flâneur*’s attitude could be defined as an “active passivity”. Being sensitive to his bodily experience, the *flâneur* is able to perceive and describe a city as configurations of rhythms and sounds, smells, fragrances and tastes. His perception of the city also includes memories, dreams and emotions (in this sense, it is intertextual) and requires certain tactics for describing eluding impressions (i.e. increases the role of metaphors, a description of changing a state of mind that reminds of “phenomenological description”, it reveals the dynamic interrelation between the observer and phenomena which are being described).

A *flânerie* combines the bodily experience of a walker with the curiosity toward everyday scenes, and self-awareness of a researcher. In contemporary urban studies it is used as a method for adjusting the optics of the researcher: as Chris Jenks puts it, “the flâneur, though grounded in everyday life, is an analytic form, a narrative device,

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<sup>1</sup> According to Benjamin, the idleness of a *flâneur*, who is a product of bourgeois society, is different from leisure: “Idleness seeks to avoid any sort of ties to the idler’s line of work, and ultimately to the labor process in general. This distinguishes it from leisure” (Benjamin 1999: 803).

an attitude towards knowledge and its social context" (Jenks 1995: 148). The application of this tactics of research results can be seen in Benjamin's diaries and essays on Marseilles, Berlin, Moscow, Naples, and Paris (but he also applies his urban insights while dealing with imaginary cities of such authors as Baudelaire (Paris) and Franz Kafka (Prague).

A tactic of *flânerie* is very close to "automatic walks" developed by situationists, whom Benjamin considers to be first *flâneurs*; it is not by chance that one of his city essays, "Marseilles" starts with the words of André Breton: "The street <...> the only valid field of experience" (Benjamin 1986b: 131). Following the "signs" surrealists explore Paris and other cities, ignoring usual tourist places (which are legitimated as "interesting" and "worth watching") and searching for the experience, different from the everyday routine. Accidentally heard words, signboards, advertisings, associations, memories inspire alternative trajectories of urban explorations. The idea of automatism, which was developed by Breton and applied in many spheres (literature, art, urban explorations), had a great impact on following situationists' practices. Also, it was surrealists who started experimenting with world maps and city maps, i.e. Breton proposed to map emotionally attractive and uninviting places, marking them with different colours. Later this method of mapping was integrated into situationists' psychogeography.

One of the techniques used by the situationists for establishing a creative distance from the everyday urban surroundings was drifting (*dérive*). Guy Debord emphasized, that *dérive* is different from journey or stroll, as it "involves playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects" (Debord 2006c). In its turn, psychogeography is defined as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals" (Debord 2006a). So, drifting as a research practice is based on the recognition of the interconnection between urban settings and bodily-emotional experience of the city (what brings situationists to the conception of "unitary urbanism"). It is also orientated toward developing new understanding of everyday urban settings by suspending established routine scenarios:

"In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there" (Debord 2006c).

In some aspects drifting reminds of *flânerie* of Benjamin and surrealists, though differently from situationists, who usually drifted in groups, Benjamin names solitude as the most important condition of *flânerie* (Benjamin 1999: 805). However, the idea of psychogeographical studies involved "resisting the controls of city planning" (Krause Knight 2009: 119–120), a drift then is seen as a critical revision of everyday living conditions and scenarios that take place in everyday settings. The aim of surrealists was to create provocative and disturbing urban settings, which would encourage citizens to invent their own scenarios, different from those proposed by the "spectacle" (Debord). Therefore the drift itself is not a self-sufficient act, but rather a preparatory

stage of the process of the “revolution of everyday life” (Kotányi, Vaneigem 2006), it is the reconnaissance of the territory where further radical changes are thought to take place.

Discussing various modes of experience of the city we can distinguish between passive and active interpretation of urban space. A passive interpretation is close to what Certeau calls “blind walking”, which is a non-reflexive use of urban space. However, according to Certeau, a walker, as a reader of an urban text, “takes neither the position of the author nor an author’s position. He invents in this text something different from what they ‘intended’” (Certeau 1988: 169). Comprehending the creative potential of the walker, who produces new meaning of urban settings, Certeau is quite close to the idea of situationists, who develop a concept of “unitary architecture”, which aims “to enable people to stop identifying with their surroundings and with model patterns of behavior” (Kotányi, Vaneigem 2006) and encourage them to rethink existing scenarios of behaviour in urban settings and to invent new ones. The idea, that a potential of urban spaces could be recognized and realized through the active re-interpretation of routine choreography, brings a figure of urban artist or “urban curator” to the stage.

### Arranging “emotionally moving situations”

In interdisciplinary urban studies, which are orientated toward the understanding of dynamically changing configurations of urban contexts and everyday practices (that shape and are shaped by spatial structure), tactics of *flânerie* and drift are being applied as research methods. There is a notable recent tendency of mutation of a researcher into an “urban curator” – a reflexive activist who is conscious about the urban problems and tendencies and reacts to them by initiating actions in public space, which are addressed to urban communities and to authorities. This figure is quite similar to what Krause Knight Cher calls “outsider artist”, keeping in mind activists, “whose aims and actions lay “outside of the art world’s conventions and constrictions” and who “make art for highly personal reasons that often have little to do with fame or money” (Krause Knight 2009: 115). This mutation of the researcher into an urban activist could be reconstructed as a consistent development of the methodological position, according to which the city as a dynamic configuration of everyday context can be studied while actively participating in urban life, what may result in creative activities performed in urban space. One of the forms of active participation is close to surrealists’ idea of “initiating situations” in public spaces.

Recognizing the importance of the emotions in urban experience, situationists developed a vision of urban space, which is open for changes brought by citizens: e.g. Debord sees the potential of architecture in “emotionally moving situations, rather than emotionally moving forms” and believes, that “experiments conducted with this material will lead to new, as yet unknown forms” (Debord 2006b). In a similar way Ivan Chtcheglov in “Formulary for a New Urbanism” develops a model of new architecture, which would disorientate its inhabitants by initiating “continuous drifting” (which is opposed to a non-reflexive “blind waking”); according to him, a new archi-

ecture "will be a means of modifying present conceptions of time and space. It will be both a means of *knowledge* and a *means of action*. Architectural complexes will be modifiable. Their appearance will change totally or partially in accordance with the will of their inhabitants" (Chtcheglov 2006). Even though developing the concept of unitary urbanism, situationists kept in mind architectural complexes (Debord 2006b), which should be "detoured for the purpose of de-alienation" (Kotányi, Vaneigem 2006).

However, as researchers of this movement notice, situationists barely succeeded in accomplishing their plans, though series of happenings were arranged. Reconstructing the concept of "situations", which was the essential part of the Situationist International's program, Simon Sadler points out, that "the constructed situation would clearly be some sort of performance, one that would treat all space as performance space and all people as performers" and each of them "would provide a décor and ambiance of such power that it would stimulate new sorts of behaviour, a glimpse into an improved future social life based upon human encounter and play" (Sadler 1999: 105).

The important insight of situationist movement was the idea, that spatial structures produce certain type of behaviour as well as emotional experience (which became an important element of psycho-geographical mapping) and are able to "activate" citizens and encourage them to take part in the constructing urban surroundings. From this perspective urban art interventions are quite a productive method of articulating urban experience and re-arranging emotional landscape of the city. By disturbing usual everyday rhythms and trajectories, urban art interventions establish a reflexive distance from the routine choreography of the place and propose alternative scenarios of behaviour in public space. Therefore urban art interventions and urban games can be considered as a tool for creative reconceptualization of spatial structures and social order, embedded in urban space.

Nowadays a great number of interventions, actions, flash mobs and urban games emerged; in many cases they are initiated by urban activists, seeking to deal with such problems as de-activated public space. De-activation of public spaces is partly a result of urban alienation, which gave birth to the *flâneur*, for whom an alienated crowd is a natural surrounding, and which was criticized by situationists. Such campaigns as "Free Hugs" or series of dancing or singing performances, arranged by "Improve Everywhere" group, aim to produce a certain emotional effect: to surprise and to share the joy with casual passers-by (as it is announced at the official site of "Improve Everywhere" collective, they cause "scenes of chaos and joy in public places" (*Improve Everywhere* 2001<sup>2</sup>)). Initiating flash mobs and urban games is also a temporal solution to the problem of hunger for emotions and bodily contact. According to the initiator of world wide "Free Hugs Campaign", the inspiration for this campaign was the experience of loneliness he experienced when arrived to Sydney after being absent for a long period of time:

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<sup>2</sup> See <<http://improveeverywhere.com/>>.

“Standing there in the arrivals terminal, watching other passengers meeting their waiting friends and family, with open arms and smiling faces, hugging and laughing together, I wanted someone out there to be waiting for me. To be happy to see me. To smile at me. To hug me” (*Free Hugs Campaign* 2011<sup>3</sup>).

The initiators of such campaigns use the potential of public spaces for establishing a contact with passers-by. These campaigns (either it is hugging, or dancing, or mass reading in public space) imply certain “choreography” of participants, different from usual behaviour, and as a result, with vivid emotions. In many cases passers-by are invited to take part in the event and in some cases they remain in the position of surprised viewers, but in every case a usual distance between passers-by is being overcome, as participants of flash mobs or performance appear to be a person next to you. By initiating and participating in urban events, which set up alternative model of behaviour, and sometimes reshape usual temporal model by mixing usual scenarios of leisure and work, citizens establish new solidarities.

### Urban art interventions: initiating urban rituals

As it was mentioned above, alternative models of behaviour, introduced by urban activists, use the potential of public places (railway stations, bus stops, lecture rooms, big shops), but as a rule, alternative behaviour does not become a ritual, rooted in a certain place. Dancing flash mobs, hugging campaigns or a campaign for pompous meeting of passengers, who alight from public transport, spread across the world and can be repeated in every similar public place. Moreover, many of these scenarios are started being used in emotionally orientated advertising campaigns (one of the most active in this area is T-Mobile, which in 2010 has arranged a series of public campaigns, using the ideas of urban activists or inviting them to take part in the campaign)<sup>4</sup>.

Seeking to create a certain typology of active re-interpretation of routine scenarios and spatial (as well as temporal) structures of urban places, urban ritual, as a repetitive symbolic action which is connected with a certain urban element, might be examined. Similarly to the activists’ campaigns, mentioned above, urban rituals provide a possibility of publicly shared bodily and emotional experience and establish momentary citizen solidarities. In many cases these solidarities are transnational, as some of the rituals are also being repeated in many places: for example, after Michael Jackson’s death improvised commemoration places, devoted to the singer, emerged in many European cities. Fans started placing photos of the singer, press-clippings devoted to the singer and messages for him at certain public places. Their actions turned the place into a space of grief and commemoration. No matter, if these “sites of memory” (Pierre Nora) are located in Vilnius or in Budapest, these improvised com-

<sup>3</sup> See <<http://www.freehugscampaign.org/>>.

<sup>4</sup> This situation of commercialization of alternative models of behavior brings us to another concept of situationists, namely to the *détournement* (Debord, Wolman 2006) as a tactics of dealing with the popular and commercial culture.

memoration places are spaces of shared experience, not only for the fans of Jackson's music, but also for the travellers, who are happy to find out that they share the same experience of popular culture with the locals.

Another case of urban rituals, which are embedded in certain public space, but at the same time transcend local context, are so-called love padlocks. Padlocks with engraved names of the couples usually are being affixed to fences and railings of the bridges; the keys are being thrown away after the padlock is locked. This ritual saturates the place with romantic feelings. Even those, who have never taken part in this ritual and have never heard about it, recognize the structure of symbolic action. And maybe it is partly because of its simple and recognizable structure this urban ritual expands in many cities across the world. It takes only few weeks after several padlocks appear on the railings of a bridge, and in a couple of months no free place will be left there.

In the two cases discussed above an urban ritual, despite its broad geography, is rooted in a certain urban space and results in a spontaneous urban intervention of padlocks or Jackson's posters into public space. But there is also a type of urban rituals, which were encouraged by art interventions, which became an object of active bodily interpretation, and in this sense is quite close to the idea of situationists, that urban everyday must be "disturbed" in order to produce conditions for re-examination of everyday experience.

As an example of an art intervention, which radically changes the choreography of a certain place, a "Miracle tile", an art installation, created by Lithuanian artist Gitenis Umbrasas, may be considered. A tile with a word "Miracle" inlaid in it was installed in the Cathedral Square in Vilnius (Lithuania). As it differs from the other tiles, it naturally caught attention of the passers-by and inspired them to search for an interpretation of this element. This interpretation of a new urban element was corporeal, it was bodily performed: while making a wish, citizens stepped on the tile and some of them started turning around themselves while others jumped up on it. The ritual of turning around has expanded among citizens in several months after the tile was installed.

The tile as a new urban element proposed a certain urban choreography: it turned into syncope on the way of passers-by, who usually cross the square; now they have got a place to stop and to perform simple movements. The instructions on how to make a wish properly have spread among citizens spontaneously, and usually are included into urban narratives for tourists. Therefore there is no wonder, that the "Miracle tile" became a point of attraction for groups of tourists; but what is more important, this small urban element became a place of shared emotions and articulated intimate experience of making a wish.

Urban rituals spread immediately among citizens, and become an integral part of everyday knowledge. A simple symbolic action widens the experience of the city, attaching new values and meanings to certain places. Urban art interventions may be seen as a form of an active reinterpretation of spatial and temporal urban structures

and regulations, which shape everyday bodily and emotional experience of urban walkers. It is a heuristic tool that reveals the interconnections between spatial structures and everyday practices by creating spatial obstacles and/or points of attraction and disturbing everyday routes. In this sense, art interventions propose micro-practices, which differ from routine choreography: e.g. to stop in a crowded place and to throw back a head, to rub a hand of a street sculpture, to lean over some artefact and scrutinize it, to jump over some obstacle, etc. Those art interventions, which affect the bodily experience of passers-by in a playful way or leave a possibility for establishing a bodily connection saturates a place with vivid emotions and usually become a point of attraction for locals and travellers, which after some time turn into an official sight.

## Conclusions

Reconstructing the mutation of a “blind walker” into the figure of reflexive urban activist, who proposes creative solutions to the problems of de-activated public spaces, urban art interventions are comprehended as a tool for re-inventing and revitalising urban settings while initiating intensive interaction and cooperation between citizens. Those urban art interventions, which are being actively interpreted by citizens, turn into a place for urban rituals that are able to change the spatial, temporal and behavioural structure of the public space. Functioning as active reinterpretation of spatial structures and the everyday practices that are embedded in the urban spaces, urban interventions are well able to introduce an alternative set of practices and to (re)form the emotional landscape of place.

Art interventions in public space may be also considered as a form of non-formal education, as they encourage citizens to reflect upon their urban experience and this process stimulates dialogue on the actual problems of the city itself. Providing a ground for shared bodily and emotional experience in alienated public spaces, urban art interventions encourage the emergence of temporal forms of sociality, such as flash mob groups, art groups, citizens community.

In some cases art interventions are able to transform the conception that local authorities have towards certain issues of city life, but in many cases they are used by commercial (and sometimes political) agents in advertising campaigns. It brings new challenges for urban activists and encourages them to search for new tactics of revitalization of public space.

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## NUO KASDIENIO MIESTELĖNŲ „AKLUMO“ IKI MIESTO AKTYVIZMO: INICIJUOJANT „EMOCIONALIAI PAVEIKIAS SITUACIJAS“ VIEŠOSIOSE ERDVĖSE

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Santrauka

Remiantis M. de Certeau pasiūlyta miestelėno „aklumo“ metafora, kuri nurodo į nerefleksyvų santykį su kasdiene aplinka, straipsnyje rekonstruojama šios miestelėno figūros transformacija į miesto aktyvistą („miesto kuratorių“), kuris reaguoja į miesto problemas ir ieško kūrybinių šių problemų sprendimų.

Aktyvaus santykio su miesto aplinka modelis buvo plėtojamas dar situacionistų (I. Čtcheglovas, G. Debord'as, A. Kotányi ir kt.), kurie ieškojo kasdienio miesto patyrimo suspendavimo technikų (pavyzdžiui, dreifavimas) ir siūlė reorganizuoti miesto erdves, kad jos imtų produkuoti „emocionaliai paveikias situacijas“. Šios paieškos paskatino situacionistus plėtoti „unitarinio urbanizmo“ koncepciją. Šiuolaikiniams miestams susiduriant su deaktyvuotų viešųjų erdvių problema, „emocionaliai paveikių situacijų“ kūrimo idėja atgimsta nauju pavidalu. Meninės intervencijos į viešąsias erdves, *flash-mobai* ir miesto žaidimai ardo įprastus elgesio scenarijus, steigia refleksyvų atstumą su rutininio miesto patyrimu, o taip pat skatina naujų miesto ritualų atsiradimą bei formuoja emocinį miesto reljefą. Intervencijos į viešąsias erdves gali būti analizuojamos ir kaip refleksijos forma, ir kaip aktualių miesto problemų (viešųjų erdvių deaktyvavimo) sprendimo būdas.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: emocinis miesto reljefas, kūniškas patyrimas, situacionizmas, meninės intervencijos, miesto ritualai.

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