



Essay

How Much Public Space Is Our Space?

Anja Reinhardt

Dansgezelschap Vloeistof, Corresponding author

Abstract (by Anja Reinhardt)

As choreographer of dance group Vloeistof, specialized in public space, I chose to publish a journal written by dancer Izah Hankammer during the master-workshop program Making Space in Tilburg 2017. Making Space is a collaboration of Fontys University of the Arts in Tilburg and Dans Brabant, an organization for dance and choreography in Brabant, which is the Southern province of the Netherlands. During a week the second year students of the Dance Academy are exploring the public space as a stage, guided by choreographers who are experienced in this matter.

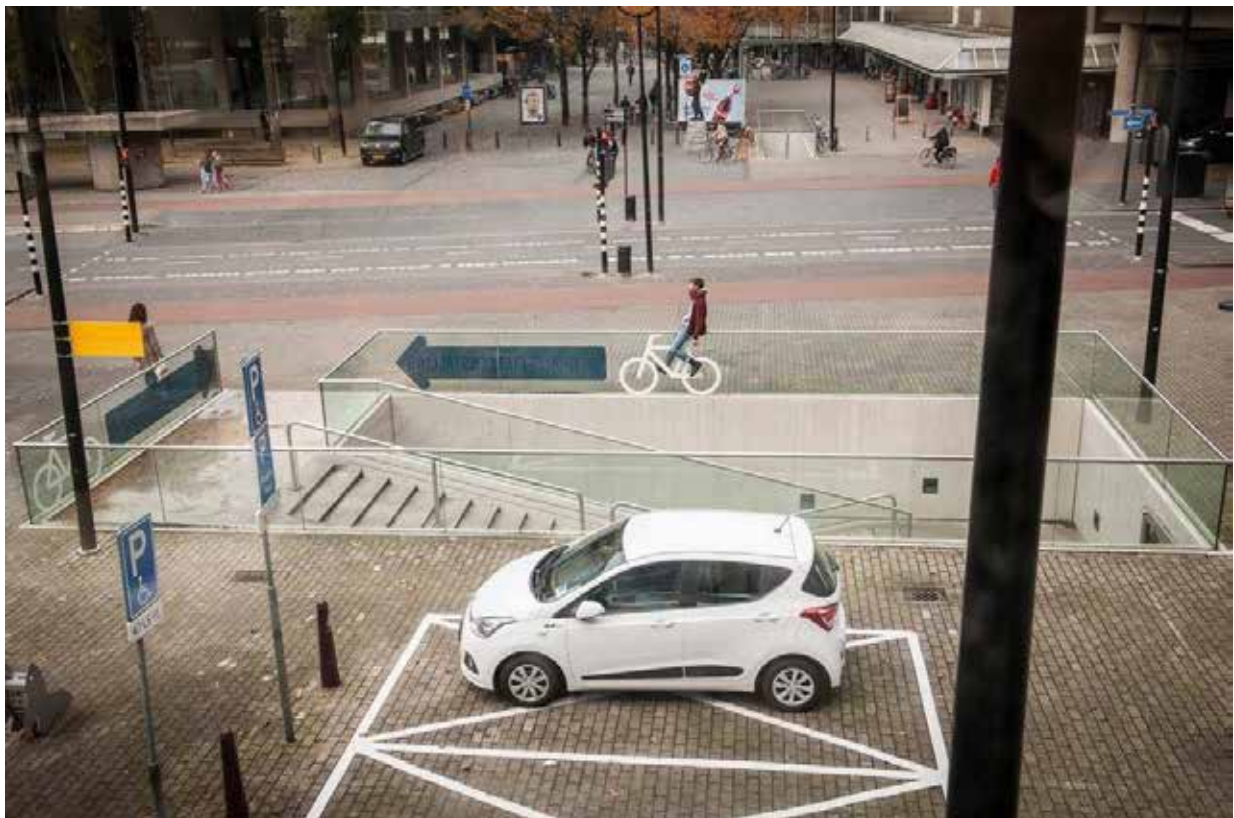
This journal allows us to understand the specific aspects that we, dancers of Vloeistof, deal with in the streets. In a tangible way, the journal takes you along to give insight into how we physically engage in and study public space, the passersby, and our art form. It is not easy to compare our strategies with those of a traditional dance group. The context of public space has led us to an ongoing exploration, wherein the process is as important as the outcome. To understand our methods, I believe it is necessary to crawl into the skin of my dancer, Izah, and to look at the space through her eyes. This journal is written in a personal manner, allowing the reader to see which issues and dilemmas the dancer deals with by claiming the public space for her performance. I hope this journal can open up my work to a broader field and discourse. What are the similarities between our interventions with other disciplines like graffiti or street art? What do we address when entering the public space with art without permission or announcement? How do we deal with the unexpected? How do we create our own stage and canvas? What are the boundaries we conquer in our daily work?

Journal by Izah Hankammer, Tilburg (NL) 2017.

During The Making Space week the public space serves as an inspiration and thus gives birth to creative movement. Second year students of the Fontys Dance Academy, along with their choreographers, step out of their comfort zone to roam around different areas of Tilburg, exploring new and exciting locations for dance. As they investigate their bodies in space through diverse tasks given by their choreographers, they are challenged by unusual and unexpected circumstances which would never occur in an isolated studio or on a stage with a static audience. It aims to highlight our freedom in public spaces as well as its importance within the culture of a society. At the same time, making space also aspires to

re-establish the connection between the artist and the audience and to make dance and the arts accessible to the public once again by making it part of the ordinary citizen's daily life.

This week five choreographers will be conducting their own research within the realms of public space. One of the involved makers is the danceduo Vloeistof, who works with the audience's experience as the focal point of the performance. Their research for this week is directed at shifting perspectives and playing with the lines of bodies in space. This week I have been assigned to work with Vloeistof, so these blog posts will be based on my experience as a dancer partaking in their research.





There are multiple crucial questions that come up when we, as dancers, leave the comfort of our perfectly floored, insulated, and isolated studios. When we take our work outside and make the whole process transparent to our audience, will they understand it? Do they have to understand it? How far will their curiosity take them, or are they not curious at all? What type of actions are socially acceptable, and which ones are socially intrusive? There are no clear lines in the open space, except perhaps the ones that are set by law, yet even those can be in the grey zones in certain circumstances. Because of the great variety of audiences, performing in the public space can be very exciting. People will be in various spaces at various times for various reasons and your audience will not be limited by the price of the ticket or the genre of the performance.

Yet performing in public space isn't as easy as it seems to be. Because you are using the space in a very different manner than everyone else, you tend to stick out like a sore thumb. Sometimes this can be helpful since this can draw the public's attention to you, but sometimes it can also make your audience feel uncomfortable and unsafe. This raises an interesting concept of an unspoken

normality or code of behaviour in public space, which is expected to be followed at all times. If you happen to do anything out of the ordinary, you are bound to feel like an alienated freak. Isn't this supposed to be *our* public space though? A space for the public; for you, for me, and for them. A space where I can be free to walk, talk and act wherever I want and however I want. A space where I can have interactions with my friends, as well as with strangers and passersby. It is a space where people can be free to do as they wish, but how much freedom is actually given to us by this public space, when in reality, our actions are defined by this unspoken code of behaviour? Are we really free if our actions face certain consequences simply because they are odd and out of the ordinary? Is it really a space for us, when the mere act of lying on the ground will raise a lot of eyebrows?

Making Space is not just a school project. It is driven by the will to reclaim the public space as *our* space; a space where we can do as we wish, a space where we can play, a space where we can dance and a space where we can create art. We want to encourage them to use the space as they will, to play with the space, and most especially, to appreciate the space. Because we are bringing our pro-



cess and our work to the public space, we can illustrate the freedom we have in *our space* and be an example as to how we as citizens of this society can enjoy the freedom that this space allows us. Through this project, we can inspire the public to really believe that this is more than just concrete or grass; this is a space made especially for each and every one of us.

Split-second decision-making

In our everyday lives, things don't always go according to the plan. You might miss your alarm clock in the morning, so you have to go to work unshowered. Then you figure out your local café downstairs is closed for the day because it's run by an Italian family and it's an Italian holiday today. You head over to your bike shed and you realize that the front wheel, which you locked onto a post, is the only thing that's left of it. You walk into an exam room and you realize today is Wednesday, and not Thursday, and you studied for the wrong subject. As they say, expect the unexpected, because things will always go wrong once in a while, and we all have to find a quick solution. If there is something that we all have in common, it's that we are all life improvisers.

As performers, we take improvisation onto a different level. We intentionally place ourselves in strange situations to see how we respond emotionally, mentally, and physically. We constantly try to study our intuitive impulses so that we can play with them and eventually create a performance with them. This works almost flawlessly when we are in a safe empty space such as a studio, where we have control over all the aspects of our environment and the participants of the performance. Dancers can improvise endlessly in the studio, because we have infinite possibilities with our bodies and energies. But what happens when we multiply the infinite possibilities we already possess with the infinite possibilities we have in the outside world? Outside the realms of our studios there is a complex constellation of moving bodies within different types of spaces, with different elements affecting the environment in real-time. This means that by placing our research in this environment we are also adding different dimensions to our performance. Suddenly we become hypersensitive to sounds and background noises, to the lines and shapes in space and to the passersby who are simply trying to get from point A to point B. We can decide to ignore them, or we



can decide to play with them and see where it takes us, but this is where it all boils down to: decision-making. In the outside world nobody waits for you to perform. There are no musical, visual or light cues, they just come and go without any warning. You have the choice to respond, or to ignore and carry on. If you decide to respond to them, the great challenge is to make a strong and clear decision in a split-second, because otherwise you will have missed the moment. If you miss a moment, you also miss possibilities for a great composition and reaction. Since people come in fleeting moments, you might also miss the opportunity of connecting to your audience and getting a reaction from them. Ultimately, the strength and clarity of your decision determines the impact of your performance to the audience. This is precisely what draws people's attention and interest towards you. Your confident decisions may also be a factor in the decision-making of your audience, because if you make a clear decision to perform, this can encourage them to make a clear decision to participate. In making clear decisions, we give our audience the sense of security in our work and we relieve them of any uneasy feelings they may have about our presence

in the public space. Yet again, there is a bigger challenge that lies upon the big challenge, which is to be as flexible and responsive as we can be. More often than not, even our strongest and clearest decisions can seem like a blur if there is suddenly a massive truck passing by, or an aggressive dog barking at us. It is this unpredictability that makes working in the public space so exciting and intriguing, because we would never get this chance to be in such random situations in the studio. We have the possibility of combining our absurd and surreal world with the reality of other people, and this can lead to very thrilling and stimulating compositions. Because these two are almost completely contradictory worlds, they can lead to very challenging situations where you must make a choice: do you stick to your decision or do you respond to your environment?

This week's challenge to the students is to develop an intuitive awareness within public space. There is a need to enhance our sensitivity and recognition in order to be able to connect with our space and the audience, and most especially to maintain that connection. In the public space we are surrounded with a great variety of characters, colours, lines, and shapes in space, thus we must



develop the skill of recognising the moment to respond to them or to sustain our decision. Of course, the skill of split-second decision-making is not only applicable to dance, but also to our daily lives. The skills that we learn in these situations are the same ones which can help us become better life improvisers; so that the next time you enter the exam room having studied the wrong subject, you can swiftly decide to go with the flow, be cool, and pretend as if you knew it all along, or convince everybody else that today is Thursday.

Making something out of nothing

When people ask you what you do for a living and you respond, "I'm an artist", people still don't exactly know what you do, because of the many different branches of art, but they understand one thing: *you create things*. Artists spend their whole lives trying to create ways on how to depict life from their perspective and to let other people experience their reality. We get obsessed with an idea and put things together so we can find a way to give birth to our brainchild. In a way you could almost look at it as a god complex, because we get so obsessed with trying to create. Nevertheless, although a lot of other peo-

ple might disagree, being an artist is still one of the most noble professions I can think of, because we take on the job of putting ourselves under a magnifying glass to investigate our human conditions. We constantly confront ourselves as individuals about our actions, thoughts, and emotions. In the same way that history books keep an index of social affairs, the arts keep an index of the different realities we as individuals experience.

The great question that comes up is: how do you create? Let me take you to a quick and simplified journey on an artistic process. As a dancer who has dealt with this question so many times to the extent that it's terrifying to think about it, I have to rack my brains first about what I even want to create. The initial idea is almost always the most terrible one, so you skip that or take time to develop it until it's *actually substantial*. Afterwards, you try to think about why you are creating this. This, I believe, is the question that leads many artists to insanity, because suddenly you are thinking about why you even want to create or why you're even an artist. The existential crisis goes on and never really stops when you're an artist, you just seem to learn how to ignore it or live with it, which I'm still trying to figure out. During this time, you just try



to continue to work on your “art” to keep yourself occupied and to try to put your frustration to good use. At some point, you just realise this is it, you’re creating, so you keep on going until you’re partially happy with what you have. You’ll practically never be fully happy, because artists also possess a somehow sadistic-perfectionist-self so there will always be things you can do better. Hence the process goes on.

This week, in our aim to create art in the streets, we are constantly trying to find things we can work with. Aside from our bodies, our instruments and materials come from what already exists in the space and from rubbish we’ve scavenged in the parks. Our performance with Vloeistof is based on highlighting what is already there. People look at us strangely when we’re trying to analyse and investigate the architecture of a scene or a landscape, because they don’t really see what we’re seeing. To them, this is merely an arbitrary part of their daily route to work. They wonder what we see along a bike lane, in empty space with a grotesque building in the background, or in a park with half-dead grass filled with dog poo. They think of us as a group of mad men, because to them this is nothing. Yet to us this is inspiration. It’s

the space that shows us precisely what we can create and how we can create.

The only question that remains is why. Why are we creating this? Passersby and circumstantial audiences see this space as nothing, so there is practically no point in making art out of it. From their point of view, this is just a space where they can walk their dogs, maybe sometimes make small talk with their neighbour, and where they can walk without being run over by a car. Generally speaking, there is nothing here!

Yet the question of purpose is immediately solved through our experiences and our interactions with passersby. When we play with the space, they instantly see the space in a different light. Our work this week is not centred on us as dancers and our performance. We’re not aiming to show off to the world and make ourselves the centre of attention. Working with Vloeistof has helped me realise that you can also make a performance without being driven by egoistic motives. This week it is not about us, it is about our public space and how this is part of each person’s reality. We let the public appreciate and cherish the space, and show them that this space is not nothing. As a matter of fact, all this space around us





tells our story, because it is our habitat and our world. To them, it may seem like we are making something out of nothing, but in reality, there is so much in the space around us; it's just that nobody stops to pay attention to it. And when we catch a glimpse of people stopping by to observe and absorb the space we are playing with, or even when we just see someone smile because of this, we understand it's these little things that make it worthwhile.

Natural state vs performative state

This week we've had encounters with many different people during our process in the public space. Pedestrians tend to have different reactions depending on the state they are in as well as the state we are in. Although by performing in public spaces we are eliminating the fourth wall, we are still separated from our audience because of the difference in our states of mind. Mostly, pedestrians will be in a state of surprise, since you don't always see people using this space the way we are working with it. This is precisely the reason why it is such a strange and unexpected encounter for them. They are not certain why we are here and what we are doing. To us performers, it also feels unpredictable, because we have no control over the different elements in space as well as our audiences. The spectators have the freedom to do whatever they please in this space, because it is public space, and their actions have the power to affect and change our performance.

If you are trying to get from point A to point B, the sidewalk is just a means to your end. You mindlessly follow your route, and mostly all you think about is getting

there. Perhaps you let your mind wander, you stare at your phone, or you listen to your music, but generally you are not mentally prepared to witness or experience art. If you happen to stumble upon a public performance, you will most likely be curious, but whether it is enough to make you stay is another question. Nevertheless, in this case you are simply in your natural state, where you rely on your instinctive self to take the steps towards your end goal. Your focus is open, but you are not fully aware and present, because you are occupied with your own thoughts. This is the state which our circumstantial audiences are in.

But as performers, we are in a completely different state of mind. We are used to channelling our energy according to a certain focus or emotion, and to make sure we project it towards our audience. We train ourselves in this way so that when we go on stage, we enhance our performance qualities by entering as a completely different person. When we perform in public spaces, we try to present ourselves in the space by constantly making decisions on how to play with and respond to it. Also, to make the intentions behind our decisions clear, we must make our presence clear for our audience. This is when we enter our own performative state. Unlike our spectators' natural state, our focus is more concentrated and we are fully aware and present with every movement. We become hypersensitive to everything around us so as to be able to respond accordingly. In this state we heighten our awareness, carry a strong presence, and are sure of our actions, because we are executing something which we have practised and trained over the past few days.

The difficulty in performing in public space lies on how to channel your energy, because when we use this same focus or project ourselves in this manner within public space, it can be quite problematic. The massive gap between our performative state and our spectators' natural state can be interpreted as intimidation rather than an invitation. Our pedestrian audiences are not prepared for a performance nor expecting anything of the sort, so seeing someone so focused in public space might simply make them feel uncomfortable or unsafe. In this case, we might be able to gather audiences, but it would be for the wrong reasons. Instead of inviting them to experience dance and public space in a different way, we might end up creating more distance between us as artists and them as the audience. We might not be aware of it, but through this we make a hierarchical statement "I am the performer and you are the spectator, so look at me" rather than "Yes, this is our space, yours and mine; I have the freedom to do as I will and you have the freedom to respond as you wish".

The key is to find a good and appropriate balance between the two sides of the spectrum. However, this may vary according to the intentions behind the performance. Since we are working with using our bodies as means to highlight the space and phenomena around us, instead of drawing direct attention to us as performers, it would be counterproductive for us to keep an intense focus within our performative state. Doing so would only limit our interaction with the audience, and the possibilities of connecting with them, which is one of the most exciting things about performing in public space. Making Space gives us a chance to interact with probably the most diverse audience we can have, so missing that chance would be a great loss. The great lesson it teaches us is that we can still be performers without gazing into the depths of the space.

About the author

Izah Hankammer was born in 1995 in Manila, Philippines, and is a Filipino-German dance artist currently based in Tilburg, Netherlands. At the age of 14, she migrated to Berlin, Germany with her family where she came of age amid the progressive capital. After attending dance classes in Manila and Berlin, she began her formal dance education with a preliminary training at Danceworks Berlin, after which she studied for a year at

the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz in Cologne. She received a scholarship to study at the Accademia Europea di Firenze in Italy and then continued her dance studies at the Fontys Hogeschool voor de Kunsten in Tilburg. In 2020, she graduated with a bachelor's degree in Contemporary Dance and received the Jacques de Leeuw Top Talent Award 2020. Her work revolves around the different facets of dance performance. Aside from being a dance performer, she pushes the boundaries of her art by also working as a choreographer, dramaturge, writer, actress, vocalist, teacher and critical thinker. She is the co-founder of moOv, a collective supported by Makerhuis Tilburg, and a dancer at Action Zoo Humain.

About Vloeistof

Vloeistof is a dance group based in Tilburg (NL) and was founded in 2000 by Swiss choreographer Anja Reinhardt and Dutch choreographer Yuri Bongers. Vloeistof shows performances, urban interventions and dance expeditions at festivals and theaters in public space. Their work has been shown in Switzerland, Finland, Egypt, France, Germany, Belgium, Canada, Indonesia, China and India. In a light-hearted and contemporary way, Vloeistof weaves dance into the everyday activities, inviting the spectator to take a closer look and to sharpen the senses by zooming in on things that usually would escape the attention. Vloeistof tickles your brains by showing what you assume you already know, but slightly from a different angle. Vloeistof permanently shifts your view of how you relate to your environment and - to your fellow human beings. In Vloeistof's practice experiment is a basic need to observe and discover new aspects, unexpected perspectives and unknown possibilities: from each other and from the city.

Next to the performances Vloeistof is artistic partner of the master Performing Public Space at University of the Arts in Tilburg, Netherland. Furthermore Vloeistof yearly provides lectures and masterworkshops at diverse departments at Fontys University of the Arts; COMMA (master of Choreography), ArtCoDe, Master of Art Education and the Academy of Dance.

Since 2019 Anja Reinhardt is curator of Kaapstad Tilburg an art event which yearly invited artists of all disciplines to take-over the inner city of Tilburg (NL).