

Silent Walk — An Eco-Critical Artistic Approach

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Abstract

In this paper, I introduce a multi-sensory practice, which I call The Work of Art in the Time of Non-Production that allows participants to attune to an experience of interconnectedness with the present (urban or natural) environment. I describe experiences on three different types of qualities and show that this kind of participatory silent walk is an embodied practice which focuses on observing, witnessing and sharing instead of producing, judging, and owning, and thus I claim that it is a valuable eco-critical artistic approach. The purpose of The Work of Art in the Time of Non-Production is to give time for a recipient to reflect on the self and its interconnectedness to its environment. The multi-sensory approach does not offer ready-made solutions or quick-fixes to ecological problems, but it endorses imagination, ‘what else could be?’

Keywords

Eco-criticism, environment, multi-sensory practice, participation, performance art, presence, silent walk.

Welcome to

The Work of Art in the Time of Non-Production

This is a silent walk performance

Therefore I kindly ask you to be quiet

There is no need to talk

I ask you to be aware of

especially

all the sounds in this environment

What do you hear in this space?

However

you can also focus on your tactile sense

How does the ground feel under your feet?

Can you feel the sun on your face?

What about the wind?

I will now guide you around

in your everyday surroundings

For the next half an hour

we will walk slowly

So, you can follow me now

The purpose of a silent walk is to give time for a participant to reflect on the self and the world —and their interdependence. This kind of multi-sensory approach does not offer ready-

made solutions or quick-fixes to ecological problems, but I still believe it has a transformative potential: it can endorse our imagination (Foster, Mäkelä, & Martusewicz, 2018; Martusewicz, Edmundson, Lupinacci, 2015). How else could we as human animals be?

I am a multidisciplinary artist, and I focus primarily on body and movement in my practice. Last three years I have run my own arts-based research project on empathetic-ecological humanity (Art-Eco Project 2018), and currently, I continue researching the eco-social themes with an artist grant. I do performances, videos, and films, but the starting point for me is always the body. That is, because it is our bodies that tie us to the world and being — and that being we also share with others. The body, in which I am referring here is the phenomenological description of the body as lived and which is always interconnected and dependent upon other beings, space and time. The body and movement-based practices can help us to understand how we are in the world, but also how the world is in us. (See Merleau-Ponty, 2008; also Foster, 2016, 2018.)

In this paper, I will introduce my multi-sensory walking practice, which I call a silent walk, and which I have developed into a participatory performance entitled *The Work of Art in the Time of Non-Production* (after Walter Benjamin's [1969/1935] text *The Work of Art in the Time of Mechanical Reproduction*). The purpose of the performance is to allow its participants to attune to an experience of interconnectedness with the present (urban or natural) environment.

I will describe the participatory performance experience through three different types of qualities, and that way to show that *The Work of Art in the Time of Non-Production* is an embodied practice which focuses on observing, witnessing, and sharing instead of producing, judging, and owning. Based on my practice-based orientation, I claim that this kind of participatory performance can be a valuable eco-critical artistic approach to investigate and reshape our being with other living, and even non-living, things.

I follow the theorists of eco-criticism (Bowers, 2006; Martusewicz et al., 2015; Naess, 2008;

Plumwood, 1993, 2002) meaning that I allow my research practice to be guided mainly by the ethical stand of committing to see all creatures as equally valuable and also to make empathetic connections between human creatures and more than humans.

From production to observation

Instead of guiding the participants to produce an object of art, the purpose of my participatory performance of silent walk is to allow time for observation. The silent walk suggests a change of perspective: how to perceive the world, this particular environment as it is here and now? What happens if I withdraw from the role of an active producer? What if I take a step back and I allow the environment to be as it is? If I only perceive it without the need to produce, to make sense of it? What if I did not have to force out a rational meaning that is not there?

So, paradoxically less you do, more you experience. Thus, *The Work of Art in the Time of Non-Production* can be seen as a meditation or a mindfulness practice. It is a practice of presence. It is a practice of engaging all your awareness of the sensory field, to your perceptions, to the experiences in and of your body.

Also, the “queen of performance art” Marina Abramovic has in her latest works turned more and more into the exploration of presence — in particular, the participants’ experience of presence. For example, she has created a work entitled *512 Hours*. The performance took place in 2014 at the Serpentine Gallery in London. She describes the work:

“I would approach the public directly, with no mediation, instructions, or script. Visitors had to leave all day belongings behind and were invited to enter in silence. Inside the gallery they found themselves in an empty space where the work was yet to be created. In this space, the public engaged in simple exercises, such as gazing at a white wall, lying on a bed, walking in slow motion, counting lentils and grains of rice, or standing on a platform. Each one of these activities helped visitors feel their own presence in the space; sooner or later, they developed

enough sensitivity to perceive the collective energy. This work upset all pre-established expectations about the public's normal experience in an art gallery. A new notion of time was created and recorded daily on video by me and my collaborator Lyndsey Peisinger." (Abramovic, 2017, 228.)

The phenomenon of presence has interested me for long. I even wrote my graduate diploma thesis of dance animating about performer's presence in 2005 in the University of Melbourne. Since then my primary focus as a choreographer and director has been in guiding the presence of my performers. I am not interested in the technical abilities of my dancers or actors, but rather in the truthfulness that they can bring on stage by being just who they are, without any pretentious qualities.

In 2014 I created a multidisciplinary work called *Rikka*. In that performance, my focus shifted onto the presence of the audience. The performance took place in an abandoned factory, which became an essential "actor" in creating the overall meaning of the whole work. The sounds in and outside the building, lights and shadows, birds, dust, and dirt, coldness, sunshine, and snow — all of those elements created a unique atmosphere. That atmosphere generated multiple meanings (see also Foster, 2016; Vadén & Torvinen, 2014) to the participants of the work. The key for participants in that kind of performance is to stop producing rational meanings, but merely to observe and feel the presence.

From judging to witnessing

Instead of obsessively evaluating and criticizing a work of art, my participatory walking performances encourage the audience to witness things without the need for constant judging. Our perceptions are, of course, never neutral; our gaze always colors them. In other words, what we see and how we see is very much of subjective experience.

However, *The Work of Art in the Time of Non-Production* can help us to rest in our per-

ceptions. So, the purpose of the silent walk is to engage the participants with a holistic, bodily perception, as well as to help them to become more aware of the environment. It does not matter if the location of the performance is in a natural or urban environment. Similarly, the performance does not need to happen in a spectacular landscape, but instead, it can just be located in our mundane, everyday surroundings.

The meaning of the silent walk performance is born in an asubjective experience; in the meeting of me and the environment. It means that the meanings cannot be reduced solely to the qualities of the environment nor the psychological content of my mind. So, *The Work of Art in the Time of Non-Production* can specifically teach us to accept that meanings can rise in an asubjective experience. This is because, in this kind of work, there are no specific objects of art to be perceived or to be evaluated according to the standards of beauty or originality. Additionally, there is nothing to be understood according to their symbolic values. (Vadén & Torvinen, 2014.)

The Work of Art in the Time of Non-Production encourages us to witness what is. Furthermore, that what is is not entirely objective and not either purely subjective experience either, but something that happens in-between a subject and an object.

From owning to sharing

Instead of the need to own things, the third aim of the participatory walking performance is to teach you how to enjoy sharing and communicating with our surroundings. As an artist, I cannot claim the authorship of this kind of work. The performance is born in the meeting of a participant and space, as well as in the meeting of all the participants and the performance event itself. Of course, this may lead to a question: Where is the art in *The Work of Art in the Time of Non-Production*? Is there any art? How should we call this kind of practice then?

I am not sure if the question “what is art” is a relevant question anymore (see also Sederholm,

2000). Adapting the title *The Work of Art in the Time of Mechanical Reproduction* by Walter Benjamin (1969/1935), I created a title to my silent walk performance: *The Work of Art in the Time of Non-Production*. I will perform the work for the first time to the public in November 2018 in *A! Performance Festival* in Akureyri, Iceland. I am hoping that the participants will then, instead of producing, judging, and owning, observe, witness, and share. I am hoping to raise awareness of the intrinsic value of space and the whole being with the participatory silent walks.

I now suggest
that you will close your eyes
and focus for a while
to all the sounds and feelings
What there is
here and now.



Figure 1: Raisa Foster guiding a silent walk in June 2017 as part of the Arts For Park project in Canton, Ohio

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