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The Body and the City. The City-Body. Svarnet: Urban Artistic Research Collective

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This article is a reflection on cities and on human bodies. It contains a generic evaluation on the use of the public space as an influential element today on the biological transformation of the city. The city is influenced by all the daily actions that are vitalizing it (human, natural and mechanical). It is also influenced by the body's movements that determine the possible urban evolution and the creation of unconscious actions that are responsible of vibrant urban micro and macroscopic changes. As a result, public space becomes the arena where to play the reality through bodies and their different roles.

This transformation is characteristic of the city-body, the living-breathing-walking and feeling city, that is partially independent from the official political and economic laws and ordinances. The paper describes the experience of an Italian artistic and performative collective named Svarnet. It notes the changing relational backgrounds between art, performance and systems of micro-punctual planning in recent years.

The power of the unusual in the everyday

I was child and I remember near the traffic light, in the peripheral intersection of my hometown, the man of the Circus.

He appeared together with the first falling yellow leaves, when was the moment to pull the sweaters out from the closet. He had a red jacket with a gold fringes on the shoulders and a red hard hat tied under the chin.

To my eyes, he was the unusual, the element outside the everyday, an invitation to fly in to another dimension: the magic of dust and sequins and the emotions of the flights of the circus, with its yellow lights and its rataplan of drums. It happened sometimes, that after some days, I saw him appear even with an elephant in his wake, in the suburban streets of my hometown. I recognized him as an unexpected vision, he was the materialization of the art in the city, a call to discover the spacecraft circus that for some time would stop in empty areas, in disused places or in its confused suburbs.

The urban art keeps in itself the germ of the unimaginable and therefore the embryonic stage of the possibility of change: a crack in the everyday after which, anything could happen.

The city today is a complex mixture of diverse bodies and wishes: bigger it is and more spotted its results. The daily movements of predetermined social groups (women, children, elderly, rich, poor and migrants for example), if carefully observed, they can reveal, partially, the composition of the cultural urban stratification.

Urbanity today is characterized by a thin and almost silent struggle between two opposing forces: the global push and the equally strong tendency on behalf of the sustainability of livelihood and the necessity to improve, preserve and protect the human relations. Therefore public space becomes an arena that shapes the reality across the body and its different roles.

The identity of a place

Riflettendo su parole molto usate in questi anni come territorio, ritorno, viaggio, partenza, identità, radici, emigrazione, memoria - ho pensato che il rapporto con un luogo abbia qualcosa a che fare con l'anima e che l'anima sia ciò che dà vita e respiro¹. (F.Alfieri, A.Canevare, F.De Biase, G.Scabia, 1990)

Different relationships with places are revelations of their hidden nature, mainly if read like probables evolutions of the public. The performative actions and the artistic happenings, that in recent years have animated the city, are new proposals of interactive systems between citizens and architecture, between real human needs and the conditioned urban forms that are normally shaped through the strong processes of city-planning.

The interest in the city and its public spaces, considered not only as social interactive zones but also as possible art zones, became evident during a personal experience, in 2002, when together with other performers I started to investigate the limit between open-air and closed spaces of creation. We were all actors from a Florentine theatrical company, Isole Compresse Teatro, that is specialized in the ambit of social theatre. Exactly in October 2002: myself, Davide Batignani, Mario Cossu, Valeria Muledda, Mauro Salis and Gabriele Tiziani decided to leave the theater and our directors to create Svarnet. Svarnet was an artistic collective, a multiple name and a multiple identity hidden under a single name. The choice of the co-existence of multiple identities inside a single name was a formal decision, that includes the possibility of freedom of expressions with the uncertainty of the true origin, in terms of authorship². By the time, the group collected inside its name several bodies, necessities and diverse questions. The first necessity, at that time, like actors coming from the theatre, was to find a free place to make art, without paying a costly monthly rent. It was surprising

1 *Reflecting on words often used in the recent years as a territory, return, departure, identity, roots, migration and memory - I thought that the relationship with a place has something to do with the soul and the soul is what gives life and breath..* (L'attore culturale, F.Alfieri, A.Canevare, F.De Biase, G.Scabia, 1990)

2 To deepen the issue of the multiple name and its value can be read on the Luther Blissett phenomenon and associated to it, in Italy, the Wu Ming project.



to note that the places for street art or street theater evidently had, in Florence, specific and pre-determined spaces inside the city. The *squares*, interpreted like spontaneous and possible zones for the theater were only an ancient and romanticized idea of street art. Florence, in 2002, seemed to Svarnet a mute city, totally missing of places for young people and for the proliferation of artists and in its historical centre strongly deaf to the real voice of its inhabitants. A city that was wanting of the germs of the authentic urban life. At that time our answer was the individuation of the traffic islands, like a contemporary interpretation of new squares, inserted in the fluxes of daily traffic.

Even if it is true that there was no political intention in the strictest sense of the term, it is also true that every action has a reaction and that to decide to cross a strong visible urban threshold is like to pierce a threshold of human attention. The consequence of this was an open reflection on the true “publicness” of the public space and on how to correlate it with the social, cultural and political relationships present in the city.

The performances in the roundabout were a kind of superimposition of our own presence in an unusual way, because at that time, as artists we were interested in creating a new urban scenery in the everyday. Svarnet aimed to generate new processes of learning and reported them publicly in to the city. We occupied the traffic island for an imprecise period of time, committed in particular actions. The performances were acts out from the ordinary, claiming attention. A rupture from the everyday. A break from the boring repetition of daily life *tran tran*. The occurrence of an event. Regarding the event, from the notebook of sketches and notes composed by Svarnet:

The occurrence of the event has always aroused, even outside of the idea of synchronicity, anxiety and wonder. Man has always made use of his cognitive faculties to neutralize the event, trying to isolate the characters, repetitive and constant of the phenomena. (Vitale, 1995).

The Svarnet performances in the roundabout, were events that caused shifts in the daily routine of the city. How can the urban traffic change after a *theatrical accident*? How can change, the perspective of a viewer, unaware of the event? The human body and the public spaces are two of the most influential entities in the biological transformation of the city, their influence is exercised unconsciously but in a consistent and continuous manner. Sometimes it is able to arrive to an effective change in the official and public expressions of the human needs. The biological transformation of the city is determined, in its evolutionary possibility, across the vibrant micro or macroscopic manifestations included in its mutations. These changes are inherent to the city-body; which means the city that lives, breathes and walks, aware that all these changes are independent from political and economic laws³. In this particular historical moment, on both the global and local level, it seems that politics and economics are not able to harmonize properly their responsibility to get to one well determined direction of sustainable and fair dimension of planning. The consequence of this is that public space becomes an arena where to play the future of the city. The body and its diverse roles are the exploratory tools.

One of the first events organized in Italy, with the intention of studying public space and art as an eventual instrument for the urban survey, was the “Networking City. La città della gente” organized by Marco Scotini on 2003. It was one of the first initiatives where the city was studied together with the use of art, evaluated as a tool to understand the urbanity and its changes. Svarnet participated with a performative action titled “Vita da istranzos”⁴ (Life by foreigners) in Giusti square, located in Monsummano Terme, as a part of the Networking. In these situations, art is used to fight the indifference, in some specific urban reality, that needs to be heard or changed.

3 I'm referring, for example, to the spontaneous request of new places for aggregations, or to habit of the non conventional use of the spaces that sometime people has in the contemporary cities: to arrive till the spontaneous forms of resistance or revolt that explode in the poor neighbourhoods.

4 On the performance can be read the article of: Chini M., *Itinerari ad arte per non turisti*, Il Manifesto, 23 April 2003



Figure 1 | Images from the performance “ Ambarabà”, Florence, 12 February 2003 (Svarnet: Davide Batignani, Valeria Muledda (in the face close-up), Gabriele Tiziani, Mauro Salis, Claudia Roselli).

The performance was made in occasion of the declaration of war of America to Iraq, it was a clear manifestation of our dissent to that. We didn't agree. We started with an immobile action in front of the American Embassy: we was all dressed in black, the symbolic color of mourning, our hands and our faces were totally full of blood. The police came and asked to us to show them our document of identification, they also forced the camera men, that filmed the action, to cancel the images of the theatrical actions recorded in front of the Embassy. We were in innocent surrender with our hands up. After a long wait, we walked till our public square: the roundabout . Davide Batignani when we were all together inside the traffic island in Piazza Gaddi, distributed a soft-paper with the poem “ J'ai appris hier” by Antonin Artaud.

The open-air performances of Svarnet

I believed in the perseverance and the sanctity of public spaces. (William H. Whyte Jr, 1980)

The Monsummano Terme episode was the first performative action, that the group made in its original true composition, using a different modality from the strategy of the performance on the roundabout. We were part of “Networking City” in the seminar of Berth Theys and OUT (Office of Urban Trasformation), our work was a proposal of a new usage of the main square in Monsummano Terme. We built a house with objects that had been donated to us from the citizens of the village, we lived there for a day, from morning until late night, suggesting an alternative use of the space that was currently being used as public parking. A constant of the group was that all the performances were open air and urban, the first performance in the traffic islands were: *Colazione (The breakfast, 16 December 2002)*, *Ambarabà (12 February, 2003)*, *A tavola nel mondo (Eating in the world, May 2003)*, *My farm my love in Portofino (8 May, 2003)* and the last one was *Thonet (23 May, 2008)* in Milan⁵. It is impossible generalize regarding the typology of urban actions organized by

5 The other projects *Svarnet Camper Work in Progress 2006*, *Zapping 2007* and *La pioggia prima che cada 2007* can be seen in the website of Svarnet. At that time I was for personal research motivation far from the collective and the work was more in the hands of Davide Batignani, Valeria Muledda, Gabriele Tiziani and the new architect-Svarnet component

Svarnet, but what is certain is that in almost all the cases, the end was marked by the arrival of the law enforcement. It was not our intention to create a situation of public friction, we were only interested in the exploration of the power of art in the everyday.



Figure 2 | Images from the performance “Braed & Bullets”, Milano 12 October 2003 (Svarnet: Davide Batignani, Mario Cossu, Valeria Muledda, Gabriele Tiziani, Claudia Roselli).

The performance was made in Milan, in the summer 2003, during the hot month of August a new ordinance forbade any public picnics of more than two people. This was intended mainly to avoid a big public meeting of migrants in the parks. We decided to eat together, in more than two, in a roundabout, like a manifestation of our dissent to this new act. It was in a preliminary survey of our performance that we discovered that in Milan, the roundabouts normally are enclosed with a fence: the greenery is a space under the care of private companies. So not wanting to create a useless disturbance, we decide to create a kind of roundabout with a signboard: “This green is edited by Svarnet”. Also in this case the police came, suggesting to us to move away from this road. As artists we were invited to take part at this specific monthly happening inside La Stecca, an old factory occupied in the Isola neighborhood. We ended the performance with an arrival, from different ways, to the Stecca building, where Davide Batignani was waiting for us, leaving on the streets pieces of breads as traces of our passages.

By the time we understood that our research was, for its urban genealogy, naturally at the boundary between the institutional and the unknown, with all the unpredictable consequences of this. *The Breakfast, Eating in the World* and *My farm my love in Portofino*, were in fact experimentations of theater accidents, to change the usual topological chains and offer a chance to experience the circulation of the authentic life across the awa-

Lisa Marrani.

kening of true emotions. This could also be felt from those who are temporarily immobilized inside their own means of transport. With reference to the open-air live performances, they were focused on observing the reaction of all the citizens to the unusual acts in the public zones. Svarnet intended to investigate limits and marginality, looking for the crossing point of the urban thresholds, like the thin capability to manage the boundaries between what is institutional and what is not institutional. From the situationism of Guy Debord and Vaneigem:

Revolutionaries planners will not bother only of the movement of things and of the men immobilized in a world of things, but they will try to break these topological chains experimenting territories for the movement of people through authentic life.” (Debord and Vaneigem, 1959).

We used also other kind of spaces for our urban actions, learning how useful it is to slip from one level to another of the city, going down in scale from a neighborhood to a single alley. Over *Vita de Istranzos* in Monsummano Terme, we organized *Svarnet Dream* an itinerant art action from Florence to Prato: a fake wedding as a gift for a small area in Prato that is inhabited mostly from Italians migrants from the South of Italy, that use public space in a singular manner. Invited at the “*Viaggio nell’interpretazione della città*”, *Segherie Ad Arte: Una Via Della Città*⁶, we made a day gift to this small special community: a street-marriage happy and colorful, full of fun. Together with Svarnet as a living soundtrack the music of the Florentine street music band, I Fiati Sprecati. We also organized another marriage in Florence (Scandicci): the performance was titled *Svarnet Australian Dream*, it was different in its intention from the first one. The marriage was true in front of the law but fake in terms of feelings. In this work our research continued to deepen the analysis for different thresholds between art, fiction and legality.



Figure 3 | Images from the performance “Thonet”, 23 May 2008 (Svarnet: Davide Batignani, Lisa Marrani, (in the second line of images in the train station in Milan), Valeria Muledda and Claudia Roselli (in the first line of images sitting in the bench with a yellow chair)

Thonet was the last documented Svarnet performance, it was made in Milan but the performers come from several cities scattered in all over Europe taking with them a chair. The action was a manifestation of solidarity with the Isola neighborhood that was in the process of gentrification from several years. Thonet was a part of more vast individual project of Valeria Muledda, that personally was committed from a long time in the action of dissent linked with Isola

6 *Travel in the interpretation of the city, Segherie ad Arte, A street of the City*. Event edited by Dryphoto Contemporary Art and by the Culture and Education Commission of the District of Prato Centre.

Art Center and Forum Isola, local associations against the architectonic and urban projects planned for that area of the city.⁷

To refer to the rituality, the creation and the love, between art and politics and between human and non-human, transposed in the complex and not protect urbanity, Svarnet always tried to open new modalities of negotiations.

There are sacred places where nobody can enter. There are normal places, where nobody enters. There are normal places, that suddenly look sacred, and someone enters.”(Svarnet, 2003).

Today after ten years, we can say, that we were one of the first Italian artistic groups that decided to investigate the communicative, ambivalent and political relationship between the performance and the city and to test the uses of the urban contemporary spaces. It is understandable how the unpredictable use of open space began a vast discourse regarding its symbolism and intrinsic flexibility, landing to a multitude of interpretations. Today the Svarnet experiment can be read and inserted, together with the hottest issues on the interpretation of the public spaces as usable, employable and negotiable zones.⁸

The art and the city today

Pero quizás el artista, como sujeto social, político y democrático, esté capacitado para algo más que para contestar a determinados problemas concretos.

Quizás el artista pueda producir algo que no sea simplemente una contestación, un análisis o una sesuda deconstrucción.

Quizás el arte sea capaz de producir espacio público y, por lo tanto, político⁹.

(Yayo Aznar Almazán y María Iñigo Clavo, 2007)

After ten years the use of the urban art is becoming more and more popular. The general direction of art, is moving to embrace the analysis of the city and of its problematic and evolutions. The topic involves more widely argumentation linked with cultural and social issues.

Besides this also explains how important it can be to utilize internal and external glances in urban analysis, mixing the knowledge of specialists belonging to the urban specific disciplines and artists as well. Ten years ago, it was not so diffuse, to think about the excess of control that the city sometime has on the humans across its superstructures of obligations and of decisions superimposed. How art took space in these realities can be seen looking at the general tendency in the world of contemporary art and also in the world of the city-planning, that are both taking energies and inspirations from the participatory process and from the artistic action planning.

7 More in: <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/2018706841/fight-specific-isola>

8 Related to this, the use of the media that the collective made: every performance was recorded with a video-camera to register the performance and the unknown, during its evolutions. All the videos are artistic products but also a visual documentation of a work on the city and the public space.

9 *But perhaps the artist as social, political and democratic, is more than capable to answer only to certain specific problems. Maybe the artist can produce something that is not simply a response, brainy analysis or deconstruction. Perhaps art is capable of producing public space and, therefore, political. (Yayo Aznar Almazán y María Iñigo Clavo, 2007)*

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Partial information on the collective can be found in the website designed by Valeria Muledda

<http://www.svarnet.it/>

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