



Week 2 Writing with public spaces > Introduction

Hi everyone! This week we are going to look at the **dramaturgy of public space projects**. Dramaturgy can be briefly defined as the process of creating artistic content and adapting it for the stage. Obviously, the stage we're talking about is not the conventional theatre, concert hall or art gallery stage. It is the stage created in everyday spaces: streets, squares, metro stations, parks, shopping centres, etc.

Dramaturgy organises the link between what the artist wants to express, the way it is expressed and the context chosen to do it. Just like in a musical score, each component can become major or minor. The place of each of these components requires finetuning that depends on the desired meaning and effect.

When the stage is in the middle of ordinary life, the dramaturgy uses the space and the story it has to tell. This opens up a huge range of possibilities for artists.

In the first lesson, we will attempt to **define dramaturgy**. We'll analyse the role of the location in the narrative and in the audience experience.

We'll then look at the **different ways of taking the space into account** and the different angles an artist can adopt to view a place. This will show how the point of view on the space influences the construction and meaning of the project.

In the third lesson, we'll explore the **different categories of aesthetics** chosen, based on the intent of the artist. A number of concrete examples will also be given to illustrate the lesson's theoretical concepts.

Enjoy your lesson and I'll see you next week!



Week 2

Writing with public spaces > Public space as a medium > Dramaturgy

Before getting into the specifics of dramaturgy in public space, let's define what it is. Dramaturgy is all about meaning. In Europe its roots go back to two sources: Corneille in France and the German critic, Lessing in Germany. This double ancestry anchored in the tradition of western theatre followed two complementary paths:

The first studies the text or dramatic outline to understand or reveal its **network of internal signs**.

Emphasis is placed on the structure and sequence of actions that create the narrative: an initial situation, one or more twists, a dénouement and a conclusion. Whether the outline is fictional or documentary, the dramaturgy identifies and analyses the elements of **dramatic tension** involved in the actions. It looks for the keys that can create suspense and hold the audience's attention.

The second approach to dramaturgy focuses **on adapting the text to the stage**. The goal is to find the **staging methods** that create an aesthetic impact on the audience: for example, provoking their emotions, surprising them or sparking their curiosity. With this approach, all the processes available to the director - the acting, set, costumes, lighting, and sound - can all involve their own specific writing, all combined to pull on the emotions of the spectators.

These two types of dramaturgies – the study of texts and adaptation for the stage – are closely related. Although it began in theatre, dramaturgy is now used in dance and circus, and can easily be applied to music and visual art.

Using public space as a place for artistic creation and dissemination raises its own specific dramaturgical issues. Unlike theatre, the performance takes place in spaces full of meaning, movements and sounds that interact with the work. This interference between the work and the performance space completely transforms the dramaturgical writing process.

In the words of the literary critic Gérard Genette, "the entire work as a whole is more fictitious than the sum of all its parts". In other words, each detail – a phrase, a gesture or a prop – plays a significant part in the work.

Or, a detail that is seemingly outside the work, like someone crossing the street, or a tram passing by, can take on new meaning when it turns up in the performance.

Anything that finds its way into the work, even by chance, communicates with the artistic message.

It could be said that artistic works in public space have the power to fictionalise the signs produced by the public space. During the event, these signs seem to be part of the fiction.

In the rest of this lesson we'll focus on the different functions that the place can play in the dramaturgy of the artistic work created for public space.



Week 2

Writing with public spaces > Public space as a medium > Medium

Landscape and context cannot be compared with the neutral qualities found in a theatre or art gallery. When an artistic work is presented in public space, **the location never really fades out of view**. It therefore always has a specific influence on the work.

Let's look at a simple example. Imagine the same painting exhibited in a famous contemporary art museum or in a café. The effect on the public won't be the same. The museum has a legitimising power that the café doesn't have. This means that the location can condition the mindsets of the people about to see the work. It can also change the meaning of the work itself.

In public space, artists can choose whether or not they want to use the meanings of the location. They can ignore them or incorporate them, for instance by emphasising the landscape, people passing by or local stories. In any case, the space influences what the audience sees. **The space is therefore a medium, or a way of communicating and contributing to the meaning of the work.**

The medium can play a more or less predominant role in the project: an artist can choose a location for its geometric and practical qualities and remain indifferent to the other aspects of the space. This can be referred to as a **"support medium" (backdrop)**.

The artist may also choose to use elements of the space as raw materials for the work. This can be referred to as a **"material medium"**.

In the next video, we'll look back at the key concepts of "support medium" and "material medium" with specific examples.

In any case, with the concept of medium we want to stress that artists are always in control of what they do with the space and context. They can play with it like scales on an instrument, operating on different registers. They simply need to understand all the writing possibilities the public space instrument has to offer. And regardless of the explicit intention of the artist, the place will always be present.



Week 2

Writing with public spaces > Public space as a medium > A support

Artists who create in public space use the space as an artistic medium. The public space becomes a necessary condition for the project. It becomes a component, a material to be shaped. It can play an essential role depending on how the artist works it into the dramaturgy.

The role that the artist gives the public space can vary in intensity. At its lowest degree, the space is simply used as a physical space to present the work. Some performances cater to both a theatre or public space. It's not that the artist is unaware of how the space can affect the performance, but the interaction with the place is not a determining factor in the dramaturgy.

The question is what role will the space play in the dramaturgy and how will it intensify or change the meaning of the work? The following examples show the **different dramaturgical functions that a place can have**.

In *Pelat*, by Catalan artist Joan Catalá, the audience forms a circle around the performer. This creates a cocoon effect closing the group around a single focal point where the artist and volunteers from the audience move. In some ways, the surrounding space plays an insignificant role. The location could be considered to be of no importance to the work.

However, the piece only really works in an open public space. The project relies on how the space is occupied, on the collective emotions created and the potential solidarity revealed. The location isn't used so much for its spatial characteristics, but rather for the human exchanges that can occur.

From a dramaturgical perspective, the project would lose its meaning if it was presented in a theatre. What happens between the people watching is important, not the place itself. **The performance impacts the place**.

On the flip side, sometimes **the place impacts the work**, by connecting with its content or shedding a specific light on it. This is the case with *Jean, Solo pour un monument aux morts*, by dancer and choreographer Patrice de Benedetti. Here, the artist uses a war memorial as a backdrop and platform for a combined tribute to Jean Jaurès, a first World War soldier and his own father, Jean.

While evoking fallen soldiers and the symbolism of grieving, the monument intensifies the meaning of the work and resonates in the imagination of the audience.



Week 2

Writing with public spaces > Public space as a medium > A material

In many projects created for public space, the space or the context are one of the conditions for the existence of the work. In this case the space is its own **material-medium**. **The place becomes an acting accessory, sometimes a character. It becomes the set, the material and sometimes the subject of the project.**

Of all the forms and materials available to artists, they define which ones are important for their project. These forms and materials may be parts of the landscape, furniture or architecture.

The Slovenian company Kud Ljud provides a great example of a project where space is used as a material medium: *StreetWalker Gallery* is presented as a humoristic guided tour of the city.

The audience is invited on a tour of an open-air museum where the works of art are more or less quirky details in the urban space: a pedestrian crossing, a crack in a wall, the stain left by a dog's urine, a street sign and other normally insignificant elements become the focus of visitors of this museum of the ordinary. The tour uses humour to change our perspective on everyday details.

In a less literal approach, the Dutch collective Walden uses the landscape of Terschelling Island as the material for its project. The sand dunes constantly reshaped by the wind are the location, the material and the subject of *Windstilleven*. The continually changing dunes are the starting point for the dramaturgy.

The performance uses the landscape to show the impermanence, fragility and fluidity of passing time, like in an hourglass, and evokes the fragility of human life. Here the dunes are what inspired the artists, but they are also the location of the performance and one of its main actors.

Besides physical spaces, **artists can also use seemingly invisible raw materials, such as stories and accounts from residents**. They may also be inspired by linguistic habits or representations of the local people. To gather this information, many artists take on the role of ethnologists in their research. The locals become real partners in developing the artistic project.

An example of this is *The Speakers*, by British artist Thor McIntyre. The installation is designed as a loudspeaker that gives a voice to ordinary people. In each city, *The Speakers* draws content from locals talking about social, political or historical issues, and shared concerns about the neighbourhood or city.

Their words are gathered from social media and real encounters and then projected from strange speakers hanging from trees. It creates a fun space for listening and to enjoy a cup of mint tea. In this example, the communicational public space forms the raw material for the project and takes place in a physical public space that encourages the audience to meet and dialogue.



Week 2

Writing with public spaces > Adjusting perspective > Useful concepts

Different categories of artistic action in public space create a **particular relationship between the work**, the space and the audience. It's important to get to know some of these **conceptual categories** to understand how they can be combined and their dramatic impacts. These categories relate to different ways of writing that can coexist within a given work.

The first category that comes to mind is **theatrical performance**. It comes from a long tradition of theatre in the Western world. Theatrical performance creates a break from reality, where actors play and perform defined roles. It may or may not follow a narrative, with a logical or poetical progression.

It may use conventional front-facing staging or play with other formats such as installations or walking creations. With its nooks and crannies, perspectives and irregularities, public space offers a wide range of possibilities to play with. In theatrical performance, actors play a character. They use real movements to pretend to be someone else. If the character stops existing, the actor doesn't.

This type of artistic expression differs theatrical performance from another important form of artistic action: **performance art**. Here, **the artist exists as himself in the act he or she performs**. Everything that is said or done is not intended to serve a fictional story but is in the here and now. There is no symbolic pretense of space or actors.

Performance art deals with reality head on, as it is, and not to make it into something else. Performance is widely used to refer to a show or presentation in front of an audience. Since the nineteen sixties, performance art has been used to describe a particular art form.

Vigie urbaine, in English Urban look-out by French visual artist Abraham Poincheval is an excellent example of this category. As part of the White Night festival in Paris in 2016, the artist lived self-sufficiently during five straight days on a very small platform at the top of a twenty-meter mast.

This example shows how the artistic act is the work itself. It's no more than the action itself as a narrative that everyone can understand.

The conceptual category of performance art breaks down into different forms which all challenge typical theatrical performance. A category closely related to performance art is the **Happening**, a term invented by Alan Kaprow in the nineteen fifties in New York.

As its name suggests, while performance art or theatrical performance can involve audience participation, Happenings make it the centre of the work. The artist produces a set of guidelines. The public who performs the act becomes the focus of attention, while they live out an aesthetic experience. The audience of the Happening interacts with the production through doing rather than seeing.

A famous example of a happening is the march organised on November 19th, 1966 by Jean-Jacques Lebel in France. Each participant had their head covered with a paper bag. Together, they created a powerful image, an anonymous crowd evoking the hidden face of hanged criminals. Walking without seeing, feeling watched, feeling part of a group...this was the aesthetic experience that Lebel proposed to the audience.

The term **art intervention** refers to artistic actions that focus more on the context than on the artistic object itself. The goal is to draw attention to the geographical, social or political foundations of a place and try to impact it directly.

These interventions in public space often aim to **rediscover locations and question their use**. They contribute to activating unused spaces, raising awareness or helping residents take ownership of them. A number of artists and architect collectives create interventions intended to impact common space.

An example of this is the Danish Collective, Bureau Detours. *Treasured trash* was a project carried out in 2014 at the invitation of the Darb 1718 art centre in



Week 2

Writing with public spaces > Adjusting perspective > Looking is choosing

Public space is a medium that can't be approached in the same way as a theatre stage. It's overloaded with images, meaning and dynamics. You can decide to work with the material nature, functions or uses of public spaces.

But beyond that, you can choose whatever **perspective and filter** to present it in a new light. Each filter or perspective will offer you new ranges of interpretations: **looking is choosing**. In this video and in this entire lesson, we'll concentrate on the different ways artists make us look at public spaces.

Firstly, artists can invite us to **consider a place for what it is**. They offer us a specific view of a familiar environment, draw our attention to specific details that generally go unnoticed: for instance the architecture, passers-by, activities, landscape, flows and changing paces throughout the day. In that case, the work focuses on the place as it is, without necessarily trying to transform it. It reminds us this statement by Paul Klee: Art does not reproduce the visible; it makes visible.

Framing, by Dutch artist Johannes Bellinkx, invites the audience to observe the environment and urban activity through a frame, activated by a machinery controlled by the artist himself. The manipulator determines what each audience member sees. The goal is to challenge the audience to change their frames of reference and interpret public spaces in a new way.

Another example is the *Safari intime* (Intimate Safari) project by French company Opéra Pagai. The audience is invited to take part in an imaginary safari, through a residential housing estate. They visit it as though it was a museum of private life.

Local residents are involved, and they act out scenes from daily life that blur the lines between reality and fiction. This production provides an opportunity to examine social archetypes. It also presents the uniqueness of each private world, in an environment where all houses seem alike. It's also a way of revealing secret lives, giving the audience the ability to see behind the walls.



Week 2

Writing with public spaces > Adjusting perspective > Playing with symbols

A place can be considered for its metonymic function, or as the symptom of something else. Metonymy is a figure of speech in which a thing is referred to using the name of something closely associated, or just a part of it: for example naming a sail, to represent a boat. Using metonymy, the place refers to a meaning going beyond itself to reveal a more general context. For example, an industrial wasteland stands for the global industrial world.

This is the principle Icelandic visual artist Olafur Eliason explores in his project *Iceberg*. Through an installation made of blocks of ice taken from an iceberg and brought to us by boat, this piece shows that glacier melting concerns us all, and that the tiny place in which we live is just a fragment of an interconnected planet. The 12 blocks of ice are arranged in a clock-like formation and stand melting, representing the time we have until the arctic glaciers disappear.

Here, the sign provided by the artist creates the connection and dialogue between here and elsewhere.

Partly similar to metonymy, a slightly different idea is that of a symptom.

A place can present symptoms of other realities: a dilapidated building or road can represent abandonment by local authorities, challenges faced by locals or a gentrification process. These marks in the landscape are just as effective in revealing the wounds or symptoms of a place as the stories of residents.

Here's an example: in 2012, the Polau, centre for urban art in Tours, France, commissioned the La Folie kilomètre collective to create a work of art around flood risks and the climate disaster.

Entitled *Jour Inondable* (in English Flood day), the project created a 24-hour immersive urban experience mixing visual and scenographic installations, poetic actions, documentary testimonials and scientific contributions. It was partly based on traces of past floods. Those could also be seen as indications of potential disasters to come at the very location of the performance.

Here, the traces of past flood act as a symptom of the local story. They open up a whole range of meanings for the artistic piece.



Week 2

Writing with public spaces > Adjusting perspective > Looking from another perspective

Artists can make us change perspective and consider places from a new angle, not for what they are, but for what they evoke. **Metaphor** is very useful here. The word defines a figure of speech that replaces one idea with another through similarity or analogy, revealing new, poetic or fictional meaning. For instance, when we say “the world is a stage”.

Applied to art, metaphor is very frequent. A garden can suddenly symbolise a jungle, a football stadium can evoke a battlefield... Using different perspectives allows any space to illustrate and give shape to somewhere else. You don't need a story, fiction or characters to travel through time and space. A common object or a situation can be looked at from an **unusual point of view, opening up new interpretations and meaning.**

An example of this is the project *Against Nature*, created in 2012 by the Tricyclique Dol collective. It invites the audience to observe abnormalities in the landscape. Artists hid around twenty surprises along a trail in the form of visual effects or physical imbalances that seem like magic. For instance, bubbles form in rhythm on the surface of water, the top of a tree starts rotating on itself, unusual noises are heard ...

With their senses on full alert, some audience members find up to forty abnormalities! The performance puts them into a state of hyper-awareness which gets them over-interpreting. The disturbingly simple staging activates perception.

Dutch artist Dries Verhoeven offers a more allegorical or even prophetic approach in the installation *Fare thee well*. Participants are invited to look at buildings in the distance through a telescope lens. Buildings appear upside down, because the lens has been turned around. They discover farewell messages, which refer to what has already disappeared or is on the point of extinction in our civilisations.

The slogans displayed resonate with the place where the work is presented. Cities become the medium for conserving the memory of a bygone age. The messages create mental images which open up universal, ironic and disturbing meaning.

Looking at things from another perspective allows us to better perceive what inherently exists. It is also a way for artists to draw us into their own perception and show how they see and experience the world.



Week 2

Writing with public spaces > Carrying a message > Portraying the world

In many situations, artists try to portray real things happening in the world. Their works are meant to bear witness. They use **fiction or documentary formats**, without necessarily producing a critical work.

A work of fiction is supposedly closed on itself. It may refer to our everyday world, but it shows a world that is different to our own. Fiction can come in different forms – present a narrative or be organised in another way. **Its specificity is that rather than describing facts, it describes the effects that reality can have on us.**

In the words of Nelson Goodman, “fiction leads to metaphorical truth”. Like the literary naturalism of the 19th century, it can paint a social or socio-political picture of reality. By portraying what’s happening in the world, a performance can also bring back realities eclipsed from collective memory.

An example is *Les Tondues* from the the Arts Oseurs French company. The fictional work evokes the fate of some 20,000 French women whose heads were shaved at the end of WWII for supposedly collaborating with the Germans. This project acknowledges a taboo chapter in history that had practically been erased from the collective memory.

In documentary works, the obvious goal is to shed light on reality.

In *Cargo Sofia*, from the German company Rimini Protokol, two Bulgarian truck drivers welcome the audience on board their converted truck fitted with seating. They take them on a tour of the city and its industrial zones and tell them about their lives on the road from Sofia. The audience observes the passing scenery through the window, videos taken in the cities along the way and an interview with an international trucking company magnate.

By having the drivers talk about their lives, the artist criticizes trucking company practices that make life difficult for drivers. He also exposes the standardisation of urban and suburban landscapes in all the countries the truck passes through. The city is used as the setting and as subject matter about globalised trade space.



Week 2

Writing with public spaces > Carrying a message > Giving a critical perspective

As seen earlier, in choosing public space, artists often take a political or activist stance. They question our culture, lifestyles or political reality. They expose flaws, problems, inconsistencies, imperfections or even perversions. They use their project in hopes of sparking awareness or public debate.

In *Code de la déconduite*, the pair of artists from the Belgian company X/TNT challenge legislation governing public space. They organise humorous events that play with the limits of the law. In Paris, at the roundabout surrounding the Arc de Triomphe, they create temporary pedestrian crossings with the help of twenty accomplices. The event invites pedestrians to subvert traffic laws to their advantage. It exposes how urban space has been sacrificed to motorised vehicles.

Ceci n'est pas, by Dries Verhoeven offers an even more critical perspective of the current world. A glass cube installed in the middle of the city reveals a different person each day. Each tableau represents a taboo that we are rarely confronted with: a very old woman, a child soldier, a young pregnant girl, etc. With this series of 10 disturbing images, the artist's intention is to create a collective malaise. The text that accompanies each image uses marketing language and reinforces the sense of uneasiness intended by the artist.

This critical stance is taken by **artists who use their art for political or activist causes**. The roots of street art stem from a tradition of civil disobedience that is often manifested in works that denounce injustice or oppression. The rejection of capitalism, the fate of migrants, workplace violence, women's and LGBT rights are causes frequently explored by artists.

For example, *End(s)less Route* from the French company Kumulus addresses the notion of exodus. Ten people tell the stories of their journeys and suffering in an unknown language, using a shoebox containing souvenirs of their past life.

The show was created when the company was in the Balkans just after the war. However, the situation reaches beyond just the case of the former Yugoslavia. The performance sheds light on and pays tribute to all displaced people. It also criticises situations that force people to leave their countries.

Some artists involved in radical activism, called **artists**, participate in collective protests during global forums like the G8, COP21 and the European Social Forum. Their involvement in activist demonstrations, speaking out against an urban planning project provides a poetic and disconcerting element that promotes the movement. The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination is a collective of artists specialised in radical action and artistic resistance.

More isolated actions can be seen in the Street art sphere. Anonymous artists target banks, luxury stores and advertising signs. For instance, artists like Kidult, Banksy or ZEVS use their art for activism.

In the words of KIDULT, Graffiti is not simply an artistic expression, graffiti is a protest, a scream of anger which has always claimed the right to the city through (re)appropriation of the commons and the public spaces, including streets, walls, and vehicles of transportation. Streets are in the hands of all and through graffiti, I aim to claim both the gratuity and access to my production. The streets are the main support of my protest and the biggest free art gallery."



Week 2

Writing with public spaces > Carrying a message > Sharing a perspective

Some projects are created to depict social relationships, to share an idea or for their experiential value.

Over the past 10 years there has been a dramatic increase in **relationship protocols**. Participatory works, immersive projects, performances, collaborative games and augmented reality walks create an **experience** for the audience that can be shared with others. They develop protocols to create relationships and interaction between the spectators. An example of this is seen in *Studio Cité*, by Belgian artist Benjamin Vandewalle.

In this fair on human perspectives, the artist challenges our perception of the urban environment using installations that change our way of perceiving reality. Lying on a platform, he asks us to observe the ground through a magnifying glass or have a panoramic view of the city, captured from several metres above. Looking into a box, we find ourselves face to face with a stranger. In the middle of these installations, a central space becomes a place for people to meet and share their experience.

Building Conversation, by Lotte van den Berg, also explores participation, shared responsibility and the relationship between artists and the audience. With this project the artist asks the audience to experiment with different outreach and conversation techniques from all over the world. These formats are designed for small groups of around 15 people.

In the *silent conversation*, the artist invites the audience to agree on how long the piece will last – from one to three hours. She then asks them to spread out so that they can see into the eyes of the others. The piece revolves around the looks that the audience members exchange with each other during the allotted time. It's a way of staging one way that we regularly communicate without always being aware of it.

In *Your Words in my Mouth*, Italian artist Anna Rispoli also organises an encounter. She brings together residents of the same city with different backgrounds that seem incompatible, such as a priest, a transsexual and a political activist. She then guides their discussion around the theme of love. The conversations are pre-recorded and then read by the audience.

There are lots of other examples of experience-driven works. The important thing to remember is that these projects invite the audience to change the way they use their body, look at the world and interact with their peers.

