Chapter 12
Changing Perception Through Performance Art: Thermopolis

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ABSTRACT
Interest in the study of the senses and performance has been increasing in the last decades in the disciplines of Anthropology and Social Sciences. Architecture has slowly been integrating the senses as part of the analysis, and only more recently, the performance. This chapter analyzes the artistic experience denominated Thermopolis, which took place in Athens in 2012, and used performance and perception as key work tools. The aforementioned analysis is aimed to find references that serve the study of the space and also for future architectural designs.

INTRODUCTION
The principle of orientation, a basic element for human survival, necessitates recognition of the territory and identification with it. The rapid transformation of human space currently, as well as the nearly non-existent societal intervention in its construction, creates an innocuous environment, in which “sites” become outdated, losing their identifying connection with their society. Human beings need to recognize themselves in the spaces they perceive, given that perception is a fundamental part of the construction of space.

In 2012, an artistic experience was carried out in Athens that sought to reconnect society with its urban space. The experience, called Thermopolis, was part of a research, which had been developing by the author of this chapter since 2007, on the possibilities of performance as a research tool. Initially, this research focused on the teaching field, as a catalyst for emotions in the development of the artistic project, carrying out several workshops for this purpose in the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Granada and within “Mucho Más Mayo” Festival in Cartagena. From Thermopolis, the research took a new course being reoriented in the use of performance as a tool to understand the environment.

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The purpose of this experience was to change the society’s perception of space by introducing artistic works within the urban fabric. To this end, the centre of Athens was explored by using performance as an investigative tool, trying to find sites perceived as remnants from former times, to find decontextualized inhabitants in the established environment —vegetables, animals, humans, technological objects, furniture, signage— that had colonized the city or survived from bygone times. The findings would be the seed of artistic projects that sought to alter the mechanical attention of the city’s inhabitants, to make it conscious, directing it to those elements of an urban landscape that pass by unperceived in the course of the day to day. Again, performance was used as means of expressing these artistic projects.

In spite of its artistic character, the findings gotten in Thermopolis, were the beginning of an investigation centred in the use of performance as tool in the spatial analysis that continues developing within the Department of Design of the School of Architecture of Madrid and the Master of Ephemeral Architecture of the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. This research deals with new methods of space analysis that help to understand the activity in the architectural space and in the urban fabric.

In recent decades performance studies have begun to capture the interest of the Social Sciences. Goffman, Schechner, and Turner are essential to the progress of performance studies, but also to the use of performance as an anthropological investigative tool. On the other hand, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Art found a new way to express all of the revolutions that were taking place, through action in performance. After World War II, performance art is configured as the most important artistic discipline on the current landscape. Its interest in the body, space, and time is present from its beginnings, leaving a myriad of examples that can be taken as resources for the “research”.

This chapter will review the methods that lead one to consider performance as a possible investigative instrument in the study of space. Hereafter, it describes and analyzes the most important experiences implemented in Thermopolis in order to try to prove the potential of performance in the transformation of perception of urban space. Finally, a series of guidelines to follow in order to develop this research are proposed.

PERFORMANCE AS AN INVESTIGATIVE TOOL

Performance

The term “performance” has become extremely popular in recent years in a wide range of activities. It is common the use of “performance” to refer to the multiple artistic expressions in which the artistic work happens in the present through the execution of an action carried out frequently by the artist himself, sometimes by others. But the popularity and use of the term have grown so much that it becomes difficult to understand what kind of human activity is involved.

According to Turner “to perform” is thus to complete a more or less involved process rather than to do a single deed or act. (1982, p. 91). “Performance”, for Stewart & Strathern (2014, 91), implies also creativity and the ability to improvise to fit an occasion. Carlson (2013, p. 16) defines “performance” as a specific event with its liminoid nature foregrounded, almost invariably clearly separated from the rest of life, presented by performers and attended by audiences both of whom regard the experience as made up of material to be interpreted, to be reflected upon, to be engaged in—emotionally, mentally, and perhaps even physically.