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ATTENTION! YOUR MOVEMENT MAKES THE CITY: CHOREO-GRAPHIC PROPOSALS FOR URBAN SPACES

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Abstract

Within the communicative possibilities of graphics, we focus on the challenge proposed by choreographic notation. This practice combines the technical, the artistic and the semiotic in an attempt to retain the volatility of gesture. To address this choreographic relationship, we study public art pieces that rely on graphic language to reach the users of urban space. These allow us to identify which elements, common in the context of the city, are recovered from a choreographic vision to activate citizens' reflection and attention and to propose new uses for the spaces they pass through. In recent decades, dance and movement have gained a place in public space through institutional mediation. In response to this reality, we seek to understand how graphics is proposed as a mediating language between cultural spaces and the dwellers of the city.

Keywords: GESTURE; IMAGE EDUCATION; CHOREOGRAPHIC NOTATION; URBAN SPACE; CONTEMPORARY ART

¡ATENCIÓN! SU MOVIMIENTO HACE CIUDAD: PROPUESTAS COREO-GRÁFICAS PARA ESPACIOS URBANOS

Resumen

Dentro de las posibilidades comunicativas de la gráfica, nos centramos en el desafío que propone la notación coreográfica. Esta práctica combina lo técnico, lo artístico y lo semiótico en un intento de conservar la volatilidad del gesto. Para abordar esta relación coreo-gráfica, estudiamos piezas de arte público que se apoyan en el lenguaje gráfico para llegar a los usuarios del espacio urbano. Éstas nos permiten identificar qué elementos, comunes en el contexto de la ciudad, son recuperados desde una visión coreográfica para activar la reflexión y la atención de los ciudadanos y proponerles nuevos usos para los espacios que transitan. En las últimas décadas, la danza y el movimiento han ganado un lugar en el espacio público a través de la mediación institucional. En respuesta a esta realidad, buscamos entender cómo la gráfica se ofrece como lenguaje mediador entre los espacios culturales y los habitantes de la ciudad.

Palabras clave: GESTO; EDUCACIÓN VISUAL; NOTACIÓN COREOGRÁFICA; ESPACIO URBANO; ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEO

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A matter of words: Choreo-graphics

Since we intend to investigate the relationship between choreography and graphics and we are moving in a broad territory involving heterogeneous disciplines and languages, the first thing we will do is dwell on the meaning of words. We will try to treat them as objects or rather object sources to be interrogated. The aim of this text is to analyse graphics as an element of mediation between cultural institutions and citizens, the people who use and inhabit urban space. To this end, a review of concepts is developed in parallel to a list of pieces that occupy the public space through proposals for participation designed to demand attention and promote a performative gestuality, which we analyse from a choreographic point of view. If graphics is a linguistic suffix that adjectives what comes from the sphere of *grafia*, like description, study, writing, and drawing, what uses signs on different supports and means and consists of significant signs, concerns the drawing, and is expressed in an image. While, if we talk about, we also refer to the bodily or mental processing that the individual produces through perception, cognitive, and executive functions. We cannot omit, it is also a suffix that can be combined with several roots to create, for example choreo-graphic.

To briefly define this topic, we will start with the words with which Mark Franko concluded his contribution in the symposium *Between text and performance* (2011, 334):

Is it possible that dance notation, and choreography itself as a project, have always resided on the indistinct border between writing and drawing? If we think of choreography as writing, it may be because the very concept of dance depends in some measure on the notion of a trace in which the body, language as sign, and the gesture of drawing coincide as the very definition of what dancing means.

In these words, we refer to choreographic notation, that is the complex system of symbols, signs, traces and drawings that, depending on historical times and the choreographer's thinking, has allowed different choreographies to be shared between dancers in time and space. By writing in this way, we define the character strongly permeated by visual and symbolic elements for a discipline that we can include among the intangible assets, on a par with oral practice. In these words, alone, the link with graphics would be evident, yet in this work, we intend to propose the interpretation of dance as a scriptural form. The living body that is the medium of the dancing subject is also the element, echoing Laurence Louppe's thought, that disrupts the trajectory between the real and the sign in the transformation of representation. From this perspective, dance is a de-representation, insofar as it makes use of a being that is by definition living, departing from the conception of representation based on the absence of life. The

movement that develops within a text, through which it has been defined and recorded, represents the performative part of choreography, in other words, the visual part of the dance.

Bringing audiences (literally) closer to the work of art in urban space: Choreo-graphy, movement in space + words

Referring to choreographic notation as a readable piece, the first significant example is *Instructions*, the work that choreographer William Forsythe created in 2003 for the *nuît blanche* de Paris. He designed fifteen choreographic catchphrases exhibited in various public spaces during the time of the event. He chose to use all kinds of local media such as urban advertisement like electronic billboards, bus shelters, street signs, bus stops, and in a magazine distributed free of charge on this occasion, and on a website. With a particular care to the audience's different needs, messages were also broadcast on radio and printed in Braille.



((Postcard 1 black writing))

Would you now allow
the heel of your right foot
to avoid
the heel
of your left foot, so that
as you
step forward on your left
foot
the right heel will swerve
off to the
right, re-directing you.

And so, continue, in that manner
with another

step another
swerve another step
another swerve (etc.)

Instructions (2003). William Forsythe. Public choreography.

Producer: Julian Gabriel Richter. October 4, 2003, *nuît blanche*, Paris.

https://www.williamforsythe.com/installations.html?&no_cache=1&detail=1&uid=19

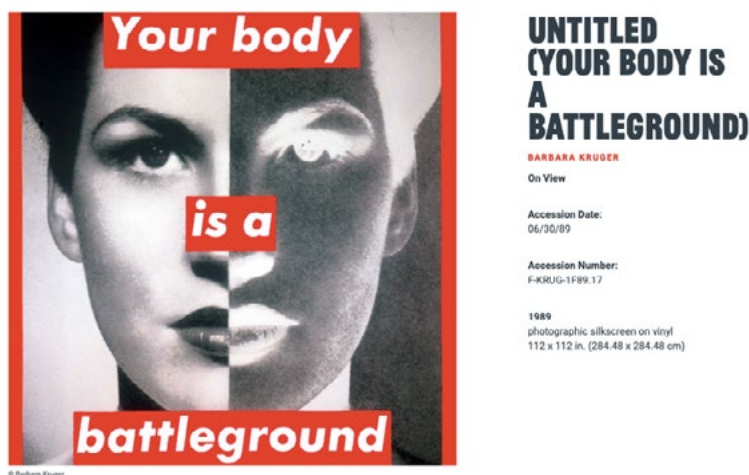
Another significant point was that the instructions could be attended individually or in groups in private or public spaces. In this project, installation, performance and choreography were combined to give the possibility for the inhabitants of the city to share and experience the daily rhythm and their ordinary space in a different way.

(Choreo)graphy and contemporary visual art: Some hybrids in the common space

Since the times of the historical avant-gardes such as the Dada movement and Futurism, the city with its urbanised space has represented the subject and setting for performative events, in which graphics also played a decisive role. However, it was not until the second half of the 20th century, with the advent of performing art, the advance of new critical interpretative sensibilities and the rise of the language of advertising, that the body, of the artist and the audience, began to take on a specific weight in artistic productions, and in numerous cases, this was concerning graphics. In this section, we will recount two cases in which the artist used the language of graphics to intervene in the common space based on stimuli concerning the corporeity of the public.

The first work in chronological order dates back to 1989, *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)* by Barbara Kruger. Created for the Women's March on Washington in support of reproductive freedom, the piece we are writing about is a photographic silkscreen on vinyl B/W, showing a woman's face symmetrically divided between negative and positive exposure. Like a political manifesto with an advertising language, the words that give the artwork its title - juxtaposed on the woman's image- stark white Futura Bold lettering on a red background. Discussing with W.J.T. Mitchell, in a very dense interview whose key themes were space and public art, consuming images, the body as a communication medium, social change, success and failure, images and their interpretation, stereotypes, accessibility of art and images Kruger states a few words that well justify the choice of his work in our text: "I think that it's important for me to somehow, through a collection of words and images, to somehow try to picture—or objectify, or visualize—how it might feel sometimes to be alive today" (Kruger 1991). It is no coincidence that Mitchell conducted this interview. Kruger's work, in fact, exemplifies the concept of '*imagetext*' (1994), later reformulated by Mitchell himself through the neologism with a strong visual impact: '*imageXtext*', where a typographic sign fills the space between image and word, assuming a role of synthesis. Exactly as in Kruger we witness the confluence of semiotics and aesthetics, in other words we find ourselves at the moment when the theory of signs merges with the theory of the senses. "It is the place where the eye and ear encounter the logical, analogical, and cognitive relations that give rise to meaning in the first place" (Mitchell [2015] 2018, 47), the point where the visual and the verbal merge to form a unique combination of meanings and perceptions. By this scientific approach to images, it is fundamental to remember it, he founded one of the pillars of visual culture studies, a discipline that aims to *restore the gaze to the spectators by explaining the visual construction of the social sphere* (ibíd., 23). Regarding Kruger's words, quoted in the interview, we would like to take them up almost literally, starting with her desire, seemingly distant from

contemporary art criticism trends, to allow artists to comment on works for the benefit of better approach of artwork. We observe that not only the image that the artist produced at a given moment in history has a life of its own, but that more than thirty years later, this work continues to speak to the viewer, exhibiting the extraordinary quality of still being appropriately present. This happens in relation to the events that still in 2022 saw the questioning in the U.S. of the right to abortion, but also and above all in relation to more widespread events globally, concerning the restrictions imposed by the covid 19 pandemic. Recent events, bring us back to see the body as a real battleground for the assertion of the most universal rights. However, in the eyes of those who read Kruger's work, in the quasi-post-pandemic era, the image has a medical-scientific aspect, thus replacing the critique of consumer society.



B. Kruger *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*. Broad Museum of Los Angeles web site.

The second work is part of the multi-year project *On translation: Warning* (1999-...) that the artist Antoni Muntadas has been conducting since 1995¹. In particular, we will focus on the installation placed outside the Spanish pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale *On translation: The gardens*. A banner with a red background and bold, white capital letters, declare: "*Attention: perception requires involvement*".

In this case, words treated as images have the linguistic and visual value given by the graphic medium. This image, like a warning with an educational tenor, has a function: upon entering the pavilion, the viewers remind that are one even when he is unaware of it. This unawareness can occur walking through urban spaces: perception is anaesthetised by the proliferation of images and words that solicit, through a propagandistic style, consumerist desires, and expectations. It will be useful to reflect on the meaning of perception, which is different from that of point of view. It will

be useful to briefly reflect on the meaning of two locutions that may seem similar (as they conceptually belong to the visual sphere of artistic fruition): *perception*, which is different from *point of view*. *Point of view*, for example, describes looking at a detail that comes from the body (of the viewer) and its position in space; it can be the way one interprets a place, an object or a landscape. Or it can be the way one interprets a place, an object, or a landscape. It can derive from a gesture (choreographic, pictorial, photographic, narrative...) that leads us to observe something in a personal way (ours or that of the person making the gesture).



Antoni Muntadas 1: *On translation: I Giardini*, Padiglione Spagnolo della Biennale di Venezia, 2005. 2: Collettivo Base. *Firenze e the independent*, MAXXI, Roma, 2016.

Perception is a sensitive and therefore individual faculty, which can only be verified in co-presence. Muntadas usually works in urban spaces through interventions that invite perception as a social act, understood as a conscious form of co-presence. If the concept of presence is central for the performing practices, and as we have also seen in the first section on choreography, these practices find their significance in a coincidental being. The relationship between presence and co-presence makes it possible to reflect on lived space (e.g. the spaces of everyday life), on the responsibility that each person has (being contextually in person and in the act of perceiving other persons/things/...), on the quality of our being in the same time/space, also in a pedagogical-educational key. It is significant that if we look it up in the dictionary for other words useful for this argumentation, we find that a valid synonym for being present is participant. It refers, therefore, to an active presence, involved at a specific time and in a particular place. It is no coincidence that In 2016, Muntadas exhibited the work with a modified meaning precisely in this co-presence key: perception requires participation.

Urban/Choreography: Writing, poetry and action

Graphics, as mentioned in the first paragraph, can be closely related to writing. Concerning this particular aspect related to the themes of poetry moving through urban spaces, in this paragraph, we will discuss the project that has affected several seasons of contemporary Western art: the *Public poems* of Alain Arias-Misson. These are poetic actions that take place in public, starting with a single word, in the spirit of Concrete Poetry. They are addressed to the most heterogeneous audiences possible, from passers-by who are caught in the street by the event, to the regulars of museums and art venues. From 1967 to 1974, and then from 1988 to the first two decades of the 2000s, the now over-80-year-old poet uses 180 cm high letters, moved by carefully selected audiences, *to write the pages of the street* (Arias-Misson). Accompanied at times by music often performed live, amidst amazement, fascination, curiosity, but also contestation and provocation. Arias-Mission calls out, using a megaphone, the letters of a precise word designed for the place/setting of the action. The bearers of the letters thus move them in space to create other imaginative meanings. From the first events in the 1970s *Vietnam to The Beethoven public poem*, these actions act mainly in crowded urban spaces and on institutional commissions, such as *The public Proust poem* in place Saint-Germain in Paris (1988), *The Hollywood monsters public poem* on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles (1991), *The Shamanic Chapel public poem* in the Sistine Chapel in Rome (1998), or *The public surveillance poem* in the Paris Metro (2003). Major European museums such as the Reina Sofia in Madrid, the Centre Pompadour in Paris and the MART in Rovereto and the Museion in Bolzano are no exceptions, for which he realised an itinerant performance between the two cities in which letters/people were moved across urban boundaries through a public train.



Alain Arias-Misson, *Dada*, 1970, stampa fotografica, Mart, Archivio Tullia Denza Ph. Mart, Archivio fotografico e Mediateca.

The (choreo)graphic: Between design and urban visual performance

In this last paragraph, we will focus on two other types of urban intervention that share the time factor: both projects allow a relationship with users that is not limited to a specific event. The first case is Cheap. Born in 2013 in Bologna, it is led by a collective of six women. It is a public art project that sees in the paper attached to urban spaces (apparently) dedicated to advertising the material, or rather the medium, through which to carry out its investigation. The place of their interventions is therefore mainly the urban landscape; the theoretical frame of reference is that of contemporary languages; the object of their research is a balance between curatorial practice and feminist activism. In some texts they call themselves situationists. As mentioned in the fourth paragraph, the city has often been the object of artistic interventions and since the last two decades of the 20th century, alongside the increasingly less underground appearance of urban graffiti and street art, a significant number of artists have populated the streets of cities with graphic posters. In this case, art made use of the media and languages derived from advertising communication and came out of museums through real conceptual operations. Cheap comes at a different historical and social moment when advertising has changed places, and media and is no longer the object of artistic criticism, and when the rethinking of urban practices is the urgency for the majority of the globe's inhabitants.

Cheap takes art practice out of art spaces, does so in a provocative manner that was probably influenced by Kruger's images, but it overcomes the apparent casualness of its approach to the citizen, offering continuity in the exhibition of works selected around a constant call for posters. This is the instrument through which Cheap investigates current issues starting from the bottom, enhancing the hybridisation of expressive languages, supporting active citizenship paths, and acting in collective re-appropriations of spaces in which to release creative energies.



Interventions from the Cheap Festival (now Cheap Street Poster Art Festival)

What happens if the graphic language par excellence, the language of signs, symbols, pictograms used for road signs becomes an ethical sign? So defined by its creators, Esterni, the Milan-based cultural enterprise that since 1995 has been involved in enhancing, in the broadest sense and less tied to the mere pecuniary concept, the urban territory. The signals aim to stimulating, arousing, and suggesting different ways of living public, that is everyone's, space. It happens that even in dramatically crowded places like the spaces dedicated to the Milan Design week, people perceive that they are in a welcoming and non-anonymous place. This is through simple indications that aim to promote acts of conscious co-presence, changes in perspective and perception, indications on the care of spaces and bodies.



Ethical signals, from Esterni website

Conclusions

In this text, we observed some artistic and spatial design acts in which graphics are strategically used in mutual collaboration with contemporary art within the boundaries of urban space. We have done this in a contaminating vision of arts by observing that when the graphic medium is focused, it speaks to the body. It offers the passerby the possibility of becoming aware of the presence in a space that is usually experienced as impersonal. The concept of presence emerged from choreographic thinking. To reinforce the idea related to graphics and urban space, we described one work of William Forsythe. Then returning our attention to the body as an image, in dialogue with the word and typographic composition, we observed Kruger's work as a perfect imageXtext, that is, the immediate synthesis of the senses and signs. The immediacy of an image as opposed to the sequential presentation of words or sounds, the importance of the gestures represented and the involvement of the senses are all key elements of visual culture, which led us to Muntadas' work between graphics, perception and co-presence. This reflection brought us through the performative poetic acts of Public Poems by Arias-Misson, between writing and poetry in and out of public places. Then we arrived at the artistic posters that populate the city of Bologna. Finally, the case of Esterni allowed us to make a small synthesis of the artistic practices highlighted. The use of graphics makes it possible, through the point of view of the article, to draw attention to the gestures of citizen user. It promotes playfully and poetically (poietic) a better appropriation of the common space that is usually experienced in a distracted way or is perceived as aggressive and extraneous. Significantly, all the works have been commissioned by an institution (museum, municipality or local authority) and invite reflection, assuming an unconscious educational function to experiencing public and shared spaces.

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Notes

1. <https://arxiumuntadas.org/database/en/taxonomy/term/1771>

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