

Dit is een vertaling van de tekst van Radna Rumping uit de publicatie *Wat als we over 'vrije ruimte' spreken*.

WHAT IF WE SPOKE ABOUT 'FREE/PUBLIC SPACE'

RADNA RUMPING

Let's imagine ourselves somewhere else - elsewhere.

Is that alright?

We are going to New York, that city so infinitely depicted, so that we can see something perhaps less recognizable. Let's imagine it's about 38 degrees out; the sky is clear and blue; the rush of passing taxis and the sounds of boys who, despite the heat, are playing basketball. Try to feel the warmth of the sun is stored in the tiles of the sidewalks and asphalt streets of Manhattan's East Village. You are grabbing your lunch at the deli around the corner. You cross the street, turn right, and then – you don't know quite what you are seeing. A man, dressed in a black suit and a white undershirt, is crawling across the street – slowly and with difficulty. Not only is he crawling across the street, but he also has clasped in his hands an endearingly delicate orange flower. Where is he going? We certainly don't know, but he seems to. What do you do? Do you remain an onlooker, continue on your way, or do you engage in a conversation?

This man is the African American artist, Pope.L, and this performance in 1991, the *Tompkins Square Crawl*, is one of many crawls he has performed since the late 1970s. In some of these performances he traverses almost a dozen blocks, but the version that took place in Tompkins Square was cut short. Seeing Pope.L crawling through the heat, another black man became perturbed and asked him to stop. To him the performance was an act of humiliation – especially given the presence of a white camera man, recording the performance. Pope.L replied that he “just wanted to do his work,” and would be willing to have a conversation about it afterwards. But it did not come to that. The passer-by alerted a nearby police agent, and the crawling body was stopped one street further up.

It's not possible to fully surmise what happened here, but it brings to mind questions of ownership, public space, race, and the politics of power. It raises issues of assumptions and expectations. We become aware of the problematics of ambiguity: the confusion, uncertainty, loss of control, and even aggression that can occur when we don't understand what we see. When we don't know what something's purpose is. When we can't place something easily within the frameworks we already have. From a vulnerable horizontal position in a vertical city, Pope.L told another passer-by, back in 1991: “I create symbolic acts”. The symbolic challenges relations, and with them the delicate balance of our daily lives. But the symbolic can also create space – both physically and mentally. Space that remains ambiguous. Space that offers a divergent path from the preconceived script of daily reality.

This space is not only reserved for the artists.

Let's remain a bit closer.

And zoom-in on a more familiar terrain.

It is 2019. On the corner of Jan van Galen street and John Franklin street, in Amsterdam-West, coffee is still just 95 cents at Broodje Daan. The shop opens at 6 AM. Buddy, the dog, hangs about (he also has a sandwich named after him) and the men who work in construction in the neighborhood take their breaks there – but other residents of the neighborhood, clubbers, and families with children are equally welcome. A few hours later, A.'s shift begins. She is used to winding her way through the city on her bike, listening to directions on her phone that tell her where to pick up the next order. What she can't get used to, or understand, is why some people chose to use the service only to order a bottle of orange juice. Is the huge cooler-bag really necessary for something like that? Her cube-like backpack and windbreaker stick out, in contrast to the green or orange other gig workers use. Her cooler-bag is white: she ordered it herself from China, it lacks a logo. It is a small action of resistance. Her manager can't see her anyways, just like she remains oblivious to who exactly is behind the directions the app on her phone gives her.

I also traverse the city on bike, as often making my way between the east and the west, stopping at familiar buildings whose facades no longer hold secrets from me. Since a few years ago, I no longer wear headphones on route, since they drown out the city. And when I can't hear the city, it becomes harder to see it clearly as well. Through casual daily observation, patterns and silhouettes become easy to recognize, and seem, to me, to be becoming increasingly generic: those bikes with the blue tires, those white sneakers, that Scandinavian designer raincoat. But then, suddenly, I am face-to-face with an eye. An eye with exceptionally long eyelashes, made of sequins, is staring back at me. The eye is part of an embroidered patch on a man's jacket, part of a colorful outfit, full of shimmering fabrics and glittery appliques, all overwhelmingly neon. I smile at the eye on his back, and it smiles back at me. In this fraction of a moment, in this flair, this snippet, or patch, space occurs.

At the end of the day, as the sun sets, I am startled by a loud honking outside my house. I press my cheek to the window to see down as far as possible. It is the klammer of a wedding procession, a parade of cars driving steadily down the road. They signal at each other, but also make sure to inform the unseen observers. A few hours later, in the center of the city, the doors of Vrankrijk open. It is Wednesday, also known as WTF Queer Wednesday. It is an evening of dancing, talking, flirting, and drinking. R. is the volunteer bartender tonight. He is aware that the sticker-packed door is not known to everyone, but this space is also not meant for everyone. The motto once inside is, "no assholes, no photos". Even that is creating space. It does not always need to be my space, but the knowledge that it exists, is comforting to me.

So, what do we have now; 95 cent coffee, a subversive cooler bag, a dazzling outfit, a noisy parade, a free-spirited dance floor. All this already exists. But all of these acts require attention, care, and a gaze that appreciates, values, and sees that which is difficult to define or frame. You look the other way for but a second, and it's gone.

Wait, did you see that too?

Sometimes good intentions are restrictive.

Earlier this summer 140 people crawled through the Village in New York. Together they traversed a route of 2.5 kilometers. Jeanette Bisschops wrote about the event in an article published in Mr. Motley: "Permits were politely applied for according to protocol. The crawl was divided up, groups of five crawlers were accompanied by volunteers for one block and relieved by a new group." This crawl performance by Pope.L, titled *Conquest*, was organized in collaboration with renowned institutions such as the MoMA and the Whitney Museum. Many hands were busy recording on cameras and smartphones, other hands handed out bottles of water. A delicate flower was nowhere to be seen. The plan was worked out in such detail, that its implementation was hardly necessary. The space for alienation and empathy, which requires a true involvement, was replaced by a well-planned and executed scenario.

So, what are you going to do? Do you remain an onlooker, continue on your way, or do you engage in a conversation?