

# Walking in Suriashi as a Radical and Critical Art of Inquiry



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**Abstract** This chapter contributes to the discussion on moving in and through site-specific and urban space; at the cusp between higher dance education and everyday life, creating a post-Certaian tear through space and time as a call for agency. It draws from my Ph.D. research *Suriashi as Experimental Pilgrimage in Urban and Other Spaces*, where I propose an experience of society from within a Japanese practice called *suriashi*, which translates as sliding foot. Suriashi is a specific gender codified walking technique in classical Japanese dance and theatre, and an important method for acting on stage. Gender is constructed physically through the positioning and moulding of the body. The original practice is performed in the dance studio or on stage. My research asks whether *suriashi* also could be a method for agency to act, as being active, or to activate, and temporally alter spaces outside the theatre; i.e. the practical application of this artistic practice outside the theatrical context. This relocation brings a traditional form into new configurations, connecting to everyday practices and sites of resistance and performance. It also contributes to the burgeoning field of walking arts practice, bringing a Japanese dance-based practice into a dialogue with debates and practices of Western dancing and walking. Suriashi performed in urban spaces was able to unfold and identify new relations between aesthetic practice and politics, between movements and monuments in the city as a way to critique the unequal distribution of power, and by looking for new ways to protest/resist peacefully. I assess this from three of my many experiments with slow *suriashi* walkings. The first one is *Suriashi Intervention*, performed at Gothenburg Culture Festival in August 2016. This experiment did two things: it engendered the city's unacknowledged dance archive, while performing critique of the unequal distribution of funding of the arts. The second experiment is an 'invisible' *suriashi* performed by the then Hong Kong-based scholar Ching-yuen Cheung during the violent protests at Yuen Long Station in Hong Kong in July 2019. It showed

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how artistic methods are necessary when democracy collapses. The third experiment regards introducing suriashi as methodology to master students of Contemporary Performative Arts at University of Gothenburg. Here, suriashi unveiled important issues regarding art in urban spaces, necessary for the art student. To further contextualize, I interlace my arguments through positionings by sociologist Doreen Massey.

**Keywords** Suriashi · Walking art · Artivism · Micro-activism · Experimental pilgrimage · Counter-public spheres · Discursive arenas · Soft resistance · Site and collective memory · Dance walking · Gendered walking · Speculative walking

## 1 Background

This chapter contributes to the discussion on moving in and through site-specific and urban space; at the cusp between higher dance education and everyday life, creating a post-Certauian tear through space and time as a call for agency. It draws from my Ph.D. research *Suriashi as Experimental Pilgrimage in Urban and Other Spaces*, where I propose an experience of society from within a Japanese practice called *suriashi*, which translates as sliding foot. Suriashi is a specific gender codified walking technique in classical Japanese dance and theatre, and an important method for acting on stage. Gender is constructed physically through the positioning and moulding of the body. The original practice is performed in the dance studio or on stage. My research questions ask whether suriashi also could be a method for agency to act, as being active, or to activate, and temporally alter spaces outside the theatre; i.e. the practical application of this artistic practice outside the theatrical context. This relocation brings a traditional form into new configurations, connecting to everyday practices and sites of resistance and performance. It also contributes to the burgeoning field of walking arts practice, bringing a Japanese dance-based practice into a dialogue with debates and practices of Western dancing and walking. Suriashi performed in urban spaces was able to unfold and identify new relations between aesthetic practice and politics, between movements and monuments in the city as a way to critique the unequal distribution of power, and by looking for new ways to protest/resist peacefully.

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necessary for the art student. To further contextualize, I interlace my arguments through positionings by sociologist Doreen Massey.

I encountered suriashi specifically as a part of the classical Japanese dance lesson. The first time was in July 2000 with my teacher Nishikawa Senrei (1945–2012) in Kyōto, Japan. Kyōto is the city where I have spent most of my time learning suriashi for a dance context. My study originates from being a professional dancer and choreographer trained in Europe, U.S. and Japan. I studied with Nishikawa Senrei at *Traditional Theatre Training*, and I also took private classes at her studio *Senreinokai* (2001, 2010, 2011, 2013, and 2015).<sup>1</sup> Yamazaki has depicted how the transmission of knowledge in a Japanese dance class happens on a one-to-one-basis, a standard method in the studying of traditional Japanese arts (Yamazaki, 2001). Sensing the concentration and silence in that space, where only my master's and my own sliding feet were heard, was an unforgettable experience, which affected all subsequent movement practices. Practicing suriashi, the whole body is involved, but also a psycho-physical practice with ideas from past time, and imaginations of where spirits and ancestors are placed. Suriashi has many functions and formations, and it is performed differently depending on the narrative and atmosphere. In Japanese dance, slow suriashi is used when the play is about to begin, and when the character is divine, noble or when a ghost or spirit (Motokiyo et al., 1984). Nishikawa Senrei made the suriashi practice remarkable and meaningful, as if it was the most important assignment of the day. The structure of classes with both slow and fast suriashi, followed by narrative choreography with a dance fan, focused on precision through repetition until suriashi and other movements permeated life. Her in-depth focus on slow suriashi was a rather rigid and virtuosic balance act, however rewarding because of its meditative quality.

For my Ph.D. research, I left the dance studio and the stage and instead walked out in suriashi through society. When deciding how to proceed, I first considered what might be the risks leaving the dance studio and instead practice suriashi on the streets. I noticed how the slowness in particular was challenging for our fast-contemporary society, and also the most deviating from my other dance practices. Moving slowly in both rural and urban, both calm and busy spaces, I sensed how space and sound was amplified, which created an intense artistic experience. To my surprise, through slow suriashi it was possible to process issues of visibility/invisibility, gendered spaces, and the power geometries between mortal monuments and immortal moments, which my chosen experiments evidence.

How is suriashi related to walking? Suriashi performed on stage often represents walking, however it is a theatricalized walking style. It represents the traveller in constant flux, either travelling between geographical places or travelling from a spiritual state to a human state (Tokita, 2016). My research found that suriashi derives from creation myths and from Daoist, Shinto and Buddhist practices. The female performers (Aruki)miko, Asobi, Kugutsu, Shirabyōshi, and Kusamai, prominent in

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional Theatre Training is a yearly cultural exchange programme at Kyōto Art Centre for international and Japanese artists and researchers, founded in 1984 by Kyōgen actor Shigeyama Akira and Professor Jonah Salz. <https://www.kac.or.jp/eng/program/4227/>.

the Heian (781–1192) and Kamakura (1185–1333) eras all had itinerant lifestyles and made a living as performing artists in both Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples and on the streets (Kawashima, 2001; Meeks, 2011; Nakahara, 1999; Strippoli, 2006). In addition, my teacher Nishikawa Senrei had a strong interest in walking, and in how walking affected artistic practices. The first initiative to engage with suriashi as an actual walking practice for my research—an act that could be separated from dance practice—came from her. The focusing on suriashi practice before the studying of choreography was her own invention, and rare to other schools of Japanese dance. Her very last performance that premiered in April 2013—four months after her death—had the title ‘Reveries of a Solitary Walker’ and was based on writings by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Nishikawa Senrei’s specific focus on suriashi also showed her interest in walking as practice.

## 2 Artivism: Suriashi Walking with a Radical Potential

Suriashi showed an activist potential that was revealed when it was relocated from the dance studio to the streets. This enabled a reformulation of how activism might be performed. Since 1997, the term *artivism* has become frequent; ‘a hybrid neologism that signifies work created by individuals who see an organic relationship between art and activism’ (Sandoval & Latorre, 2008, pp. 82–83). The claim is that an artistic experience is transformative and thus changes people and society. In 2005, literature scholar Andrew Hewitt showed through his concept ‘social choreography’ that ideology needs to be understood as something embodied and practiced, not just as an abstract form of consciousness (Hewitt, 2005). Choreography is a way of thinking about the relationship of aesthetics to politics. DIY activism is described as ‘small-scale user-initiated, not officially sanctioned tactics’ (Fabian & Samson, 2016, p. 167). However, not all DIY-activities are connected to art. Small-scale tactics sometimes grow to involve the whole world, for example Swedish Greta Thunberg’s *Skolstrejk för klimatet*, which started in 2018. What began as a one-person strike inspired the weekly demonstrations in hundreds of cities called *Fridays for Future* in The Hague.<sup>2</sup> Another concept in use is *micro-activism*. The political scientist Jose Marichal defines micro-activism ‘as one-to-several forms of politically oriented communication that reflect expressive micro-political accomplishments’ (Marichal, 2013). In micro-activism, the goal is not to mobilize one big cause. Instead, it regards smaller activities for small changes, for example ‘the formation of political Facebook groups, the retweeting of articles of political interest and the sharing of politically relevant videos on YouTube’ (Marichal, 2013) (Fig. 1).

Suriashi relocated from the studio to the streets found a way to ask what might happen to space as a result of a performative, slow and possibly radical walking act. Suriashi did not cause a stir, but as a slow physical action it definitely had an impact. Bodies are always used as political tools in activism—for example through walking

<sup>2</sup> <https://theyearofgreta.com/>.





**Fig. 1** The author walks in suriashi as pilgrimage in Bloomsbury with conference participants at the Archives, Art and Activism Conference at University College London in 2015. *Photo* Ami Skånberg Dahlstedt © Ami Skånberg Dahlstedt

and marching—but as dance scholar Jaana Parviainen pointed, “many scholars have ignored activists’ highly sophisticated and intelligent ways of using their moving bodies” (Parviainen, 2010, p. 311). She meant that when we focus too much of the agenda of an act—such as protesting against inequalities, we ignore how political ideas are performed as concrete gestures and postures. However, to concern suriashi only from a dance aesthetical point of view blocked any other potential of what suriashi could stimulate rather than being a fixed tool for perfection. Also, suriashi relocated to the streets might be considered a political object in itself rather than an independent performance with a political content. Bodily actions can stir awareness, and thus stimulate change.

### 3 Choreography as Political March

In order to situate my work with suriashi, I make a comparison to other choreographer’s engagement in dance and politics. Choreographers emerging from the postmodern era in the U.S., such as Deborah Hay, claimed that dance itself can be considered a political activism. However, Hay did not point to waving signs in the streets; her activism was situated in the studio and worked to change mainstream systems of dance training and choreographic transmission (Steinwald, 2012). Earlier, Pearl Primus (1919–1994) declared her dance to be ‘the scream which eases for a while the terrible frustration common to all human beings who, because of race, creed or colour, are ‘invisible’ (Courtney, 2021). Later, choreographer Liz Lerman

described how it may seem ‘as if the artist is behaving like an activist, when actually all she is doing is building a world in which she can live and work’ (Lerman, 2014, p. 242). Dance pieces such as Yvonne Rainer’s *Street Action* (1970) and Anna Halprin’s (1920–2021) *Blank Placard Dance* (1970) performed as political marches on the streets were conceived as a way to provoke audience participation, however not as confrontational as an actual political march. Instead, they were performed to activate issues that matters to people on a personal and collective level. In my research, suriashi also functions as a political march where the body alignment and self-reflexivity was an important part of the investigation. This enabled a transformation of the original agenda of feminine suriashi as an act of ‘becoming woman’ for male performers to instead include an activist position in which the discussion concerned what was revealed while moving slowly. The fact that ‘feminine suriashi’ was constructed because of the banning of women from stage by Tokugawa shogunate in the seventeenth century, activated an embodied discussion of inequalities and of historical and contemporary gendered violence. The discussion was nourished through the rehearsal and repetition of feminine suriashi on the streets.

## 4 Aesthetic Experience as Activism

Educational reformer John Dewey explained ‘aesthetic experience’, as ‘where the quality of the experience, the feeling of wholeness or fulfilment, will define whether the experience is to be seen as aesthetic or not’ (Leddy, 2006). My research showed that moving together in suriashi created an aesthetic experience and a sense of collective ritual. Suriashi performed in a group enabled critique of spatial practices, where the group of people do not march in defence or march forward any messages, but instead lean back in space, and move slowly together. I have presented suriashi as artistic research at symposiums and conferences. In these contexts, I have found that when people engage in slow suriashi together with me in groups, they gradually perceive themselves as one single body. When this slightly more secure body visit a place, feelings of gratitude, affiliation, humility and euphoria appear. For example, at the Archives, Art and Activism Conference at UCL in 2015, participants ‘felt protected and empowered by being part of the group’, ‘feeling capable of filling a moving gesture’ transported ‘to a space of infinite time’. One of the participants claimed: ‘Activism is WITH not AGAINST’ (UCL, 2015).

At first, the UCL conference suriashi walk had such a rich level of detail that it was difficult to think critically of the event. Still, my claim is that suriashi offered to think critically together while we simultaneously had individual experiences of the body alignment, the slowness, and with space. Our moving slowly together, created arguments of resistance for future strategies and for being in the world as individuals and as collectives. The conference participants wrote that when suriashi was performed together with others, the space was perceived as protected and secure. Practicing slow feminine suriashi together activated a sense of care among the participants, as in ‘caring about each other’. One participant wrote that the experienced

bodily discomfort with the suriashi walking task was still worth it with regards to assisting a peer with bringing forward new questions and answers in their research. This showed the fact that even if we are—in research conferences, artistic practices, education, work, life—positioned against each other as if in a competition, we can always work for strategies that enable support and care about each and everyone's different perspectives. My conference presentation, leaving the conventional conference space, evidenced how methodologies from artistic research contributed to innovative, embodied thinking. I claim that our eleven-minute slow walk in suriashi potentially worked as an example of activism or artivism. Suriashi was therefore proposed as a walking activism in 2015 for the first time.

However, when we perform artivism in urban spaces, we must always process how we interact with the rest of society. Sociologist Christian Borch's research showed how a group of people protesting is a force to fear, an embodiment of danger. The notion of crowds has referred 'to something which is intrinsic to the edifice of this social order' ... 'and therefore looked upon with terror' (Borch, 2012). I engage with this problem in this chapter as I present how suriashi found its way into the democratic movement in Hong Kong where the ruling powers took advantage of reacting violently to 'the crowd', while completely ignoring the peaceful message of the democratic protest. Suriashi performed during the Hong Kong movement showed how artivism functioned as a critical art of inquiry, blurring the boundaries between aesthetic practice, inquiry, activism, and everyday life.

## 5 Method

The methodological framework for this investigation originated from studying suriashi in a theatrical studio context in Kyoto. However, the practice changed focus, and instead developed into a methodology for experiencing spaces and society in a new way. Suriashi originated as a method for embodied stability, for example in dance and martial arts, where suriashi is a distinct way of working, a precise way of using the body as an instrument/tool to get something done—such as performing a narrative. When suriashi was relocated to outdoor spaces, the practice changed from being a method for perfection and instead became a methodology for processing society. Suriashi was not performed as a secondary experimentation, but instead served as an overarching strategy. In that sense, the suriashi practice is the methodological frame itself. Knowledge achieved through practising suriashi was not a static endeavour; it changed with the situations and spaces performed within and elicited a variation of artistic experiences. By performing suriashi alone and with others, I was able to find new questions and answers regarding gender, space and dance practice.

I exemplify this by revisiting and elaborating on three experiments with slow suriashi walking in urban spaces. The first one is 'Suriashi Intervention', performed at Gothenburg Culture Festival in August 2016. The second is an 'invisible' suriashi performed by the then Hong Kong-based scholar Ching-yuen Cheung during the violent protests at Yuen Long Station in Hong Kong in July 2019. The third

experiment shows how suriashi unveiled important issues regarding art in urban spaces, necessary for Master students in performative practices. In order to frame these concepts and apply them towards an analysis of these walking experiments, I use my own empirical observations and experiences from being an insider to the dance field in the city Gothenburg. I state that the experiment and the analysis show aesthetic practise's and activism's importance as a way to form democratic values, both in peaceful times and in times of crisis.

### ***5.1 Suriashi as Walking and as Experimental Pilgrimage***

Valuing the lived experiences from suriashi walks, the word *pilgrimage* seemed appropriate for conceptualizing choreographed walks with no obvious agenda as a methodological frame. By claiming the concept 'pilgrimage', it is possible to structure dance practice, walking and the reflective component activated through suriashi. Pilgrimages are performed in specific spaces on specific routes to achieve a religious experience and an enhanced reflection of the self. Suriashi performed for my research was not aiming for achieving a specific religious experience, however Nishikawa Senrei requested a mindful way of working, which encouraged and valued the experience of practicing slowly and in silence. I found further support for my claim from the Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960) who meant the purpose of pilgrimages were not for a specific religious purpose, "but an experience to understand art" (Watsuji, quoted by Cheung, 2018, p. 141). Watsuji did not walk in suriashi, but he walked slowly in order to understand how past times interact with contemporary times (Sullivan, 2014). Watsuji's slow walking through temples experiencing sculptures—and the rhythm of objects—from many angles was for him a source of spiritual enlightenment. A pilgrimage provides space and time for paying close attention to our being in the world. Watsuji meant that walking while appreciating art engendered an otherworldly mood, which I argue suriashi also brings about (Sullivan, 2014). The artistic or bodily experience of the practice informs an autoethnographic perspective, which I use extensively in this chapter. However, this 'otherworldly mood' achieved from suriashi can also engage critically with situations and societal issues.

### ***5.2 Participants***

See Fig. 2.





**Fig. 2** The author Ami Skånberg Dahlstedt with artists and students at Gothenburg Culture Festival, Aug 17th, 2016. *Photo* Palle Dahlstedt © Ami Skånberg Dahlstedt

## 6 Example #1: Suriashi Intervention at Gothenburg Culture Festival

I process what was manifested during the experiment with slow suriashi walking as a political, experimental pilgrimage, which further helped define suriashi's potential to become a critical and radical act. I was searching for a word that described the specific role suriashi might play when it was made into a societal performative act, and I decided to use 'intervention' in the title. *Suriashi Intervention* was targeted towards the city's unequal distribution of funding of the arts, which has affected the local female dance artists. My critique of the city's spatial injustice was offered through suriashi emerged at a much slower pace, where walkers of all genders leaned back in space, while appropriating the 'feminine' embodiment as a feminist strategy. 'Suriashi intervention', investigated how suriashi could work in resistance to gendered inequalities. My aim was to facilitate participants to walk consciously, while experiencing suriashi's 'feminine' shape of the body, the slow encounter with a fast society, interconnected with political cause. It aimed to be a contribution to political marching in the form of an artistic/activist pilgrimage, walking to acknowledge the absence of artistic practice, particularly by women dancers, in the city centre.