



) response by Liz Rech

Hosting Togetherness as a Tool for Future Resistance

Research format *Testing in Performance*, response by Liz Rech

In my artistic research I am looking at the two terms ‘movement’ and ‘mobilisation’ at the crossroads of choreography/dance, activism and politics. My research topic includes the gathering and presence of bodies in resistance in the public and the making of temporary collective identity by moving within and through “social choreography” (Hewitt 2005). Assemblies (political meetings as well as the gathering of bodies in movement) temporarily generate community at a specific place, whereby, in keeping with Jean-Luc Nancy, community is understood as a co-existence, a co-presence, and as a “being-*with*” (Nancy 2000: 13) – and not as a self-contained collective body. I am especially interested in formats of movements such as marches and circle dances, which are used by participants of social movements themselves (and are not designed by artists as interventions into the political field). It was very clear for me that organising and hosting a moving assembly within my artistic research project meant taking the responsibility for a rehearsal of “contemporary and future togetherness” (Peters/Gunsilius/Matthias/Evert/Wildner 2021), and this would require a clear balance between freedom and structure within the performances. There are different, sometimes conflicting, needs and desires you have to combine within your research setting: Your responsibility as a host and the desire to create a safe space as well as an overall enriching experience can collide with your desire to experiment with open settings, sharing agency, taking risks, and navigating the unknown. Basically, you will have to answer the question how much control or, respectively, loss of control, you accept and inscribe in your research setting. This also relates to the question how you are able to deal with difficulties and contingent circumstances.

In my artistic research, you can clearly see a development within my two research set-ups from a low-risk design in my first artistic research project (ñññññ *Marching Session I – VI*
_____ ñññññ *An Interactive (Lecture) Performance for Followers and Pacemakers*

(2016))¹ to a high-risk design in my second artistic research project (*Hello, March! Collective Walking Performance* (2017))². However, this does not necessarily mean that I think one option is better (both have different potentials and entail different challenges).

Before I will go into detail to elaborate on the structure, problems and potentials of the two research set-ups I would like to address a very important concept that is relevant for both of them: the 'safe space'. What does it mean to be the host of a participatory performance and how do you create a safe space that can be inhabited by the participants as an empowering situation? For me, the following points are crucial:

- *Take care of logistics and legal obligations.* In particular, actions in public space need to be planned well and sometimes permits have to be organised.
- *Be as transparent as possible!* Share your motivations, interests, expectations, questions, doubts, etcetera, with the group.
- *Offer clear rules for the space and the action.* In order to create trust and enable participants to develop agency, explain what is going to happen and when.
- *Offer different levels of participation and different options to act!* Having options enables freedom of action and playfulness.
- *Create affinity groups!* Since people might not know each other and will not have acted together as a collective before, organising them in smaller groups can help them to orientate themselves.
- *Know your (cultural) terrain!* Choose the space carefully and analyse its multiple layers, physical qualities and power structures. Try to observe how the space is conceived before you temporarily invite participants to overlay its code with alternative spatial practices.
- *Work on atmospheres!* Atmospheres are a powerful tool to change power relations, to enable actions of representation and to alleviate stress.
- *Do not take unnecessary risks!* Think strategically and try to differentiate between risks that can be minimized and risks that have to be taken.
- *Take responsibility as a host!* Do not presume there is equality between you, the performers and the participants – you have more information about the setting and this puts you into a position of power. Try to act as facilitator, be available and approachable.

It is evident that every performative research setting needs its own safe space and, depending on the setting, different points can be less or more important. I use the term 'safe space' as Mary Ann Hunter describes it: "a processual act of ever-becoming: a space of messy negotiations that allow individual and group actions of representation to occur, as well as opportunities for 'utopian performatives'." (Hunter 2008: 5)³. Especially when working in public space, it is helpful to perceive this public space as "a fluid save space" that "is subject to observations and intervention" and as a "risk-attractive space in a social and artistic sense" (Hunter 2008:12). And, of course, you will face the problem that 'safety' is a very subjective concept and might not even be the overall goal. Flensner and von der Lippe ask the important question "Being safe from what and safe for whom?" and underline that "what is experienced as safe by some [...] may be experienced as unsafe by others." (Flensner/von der Lippe 2019: 283) The question has multiple dimensions and will be answered differently from the position of the participant, the position of the artist, and the position of the researcher.

All these aspects have led to very different decisions within the different research set-ups, which cannot be explained in detail here. But they are closely linked to the risk management, the (unexepected) problems and potentials of the two set-ups. In my first artistic research project *ñññññ Marching Session I – VI* _____ *ñññññ*, I explored the potential of marching as an emancipatory practice. In order to do so, I defined different fields of interest and started with a series of seven workshops to explore the different topics (such as *march & objects*, *march & sound*, *march & choreography*). The different co-researchers had backgrounds in dance, music, visual arts and activism, contributed their special knowledge and defined focal points within the different research fields. Some of them became members of a core group that later rehearsed for and performed in a lecture performance at *K3 – Zentrum für Choreographie* with me, where we presented the outcome of the research on a theatre stage. This site can be described as a relatively safe space, because it is an indoor location with limited access, framed by the conventions of the theatre. After the performance, there were two workshops with the audience, where we shared the body practice of a moving swarm to introduce participants to a marching technique with fluid leadership. In the end, the participants of each workshop performed in front of the other group in the theatre space, followed by a questionnaire session.

In contrast to this, the second research project *Hello, March!* was prepared in a totally different way.

What was important was the work on the concept, the preparation of objects and props, the communication with the police and the application for the demonstration permit, the test of the sound equipment, a site inspection with a core group of the performers and the

facilitation of an improvised spacing of the performers within relatively vague parameters agreed upon beforehand. This time, no rehearsal of the overall performance was possible. For me, it was very helpful to frame the participatory performances as “public try-outs” and as “rehearsals”⁴; in fact, especially in the case of *Hello, March!*, the public performance was *the first and only* rehearsal that ever took place. This is a real challenge for a theatre maker who normally works with a series of rehearsals to test and improve the setting. Since you cannot rehearse a participatory performance with a large number of participants in public space beforehand, you can just think it through, develop possible scenarios, work on timeframes and logistics and prepare the tools for the performance the best you can. And, of course, you will work with body knowledge you have already gathered and build on concrete experiences you have made.⁵ Finally, you will have to work on an adequate invitation, on ways of addressing the future assembly and you have to be ready to work with everybody who shows up as a participant on the day of the performance. Interestingly, this aspect makes the participatory performance resemble direct action in the political field more closely than conventional performance-making. However, this might not be surprising considering that working on performative formats such as interventions, marches and collective dances in public space always leads to the crucial question of how the subject becomes visible as a political subject in public space. Direct action is often associated with a high risk for the participants, but smart organisers consider power dynamics and know very well how important it is to differentiate between risks that can be reduced to a minimum and those that must be taken. Even if you might think that it is a paradox to talk about safe spaces within direct action, a lot of the preparation of direct actions (such as creating affinity groups) is dedicated to creating at least a partly safe space, which can in turn become a “brave space” (Arao/Clemens 2013). Of course, a safe space in a performative research setting seems to be a lot safer but will nevertheless only be a partly safe space.

If you compare some basic parameters of the two performances, it becomes evident that the second set-up is much more difficult to control:

Research project)))) Marching Session I - VI)))) Interactive (Lecture) Performance for Followers and Pacemakers (24 April 2016)	Hello, March! Collective Walking Performance for Followers and Pacemakers (9 September 2017)
Format	Lecture performance with additional workshop (body practice with audience)	Site-specific participatory performance in public space (demonstration)
Procedure	Four parts: I: Lecture performance II: Workshops III: Collective performance with audience IV: Questionnaires answered in pairs by audience members to evaluate their experience during the workshop	Three parts: I: Greeting, introduction, formation of the march II: Walking performance with audience III: Questionnaires to evaluate the experience during the performance
Structure	Break between performance and workshop phase with audience	Hybrid format; rehearsed actions by the performers and improvised actions of the audience take place alongside each other
Location	Indoors (K3 – Zentrum für Choreographie, Hamburg)	Outdoors (in Hammerbrook, Hamburg)
Type of space	Theatre space (relatively safe: indoors, limited access)	Public space (provisions made to make it as safe as possible)
Power Structure	Presence of theatre staff; performers dominate the space and facilitate the workshops; later, each member of the audience can take over leadership within the moving swarm formation	Presence of police who monitored the route of the march; performers are only a small group within a marching crowd; each participant can choose beforehand his or her part within different positions within the march (for instance in the music group or carrying objects)
Who performs?	Performers (and, later, the audience)	Participants, performers (and the police)
Who is watching?	The audience (and, later, one half of the audience and the performers)	Bystanders and police (no conventional audience)
Access	Limited number of participants with theatre tickets; admission control	Unrestricted access (anybody can join)
Preparation	Well-rehearsed; produced within the theatre system with professional stage sound and lighting	Preparation of objects; application for the demonstration permit; test of sound equipment; site inspection and agreement on spacing of performers; almost no rehearsal
Support Structure	Infrastructure of K3 (Admission staff, technicians, etcetera)	Support by K3 and Hallo Festspiele; protection by police (demonstration permit)
Invitation (Communication beforehand)	Promotion through K3 and the postgraduate programme Performing Citizenship	Promotion through K3, Performing Citizenship and Hallo Festspiele; invitation through activist networks (Gängeviertel, buttclub, Right to the City movement)
Agency of the participants	No participation of the audience during the lecture performance; participation during the workshop was structured very much through the workshop leader; participation during the collective performance was guided by the moving swarm formation; possibility to take temporal leadership	Participants could choose where they wanted to walk within the march, which of the different objects they wanted to carry and together with whom, or if they wanted to be part of the music group; they could also do neither; the general direction was decided in advance and the performers guided the march

If you look at the difficulties that occurred in the two different set-ups, it is evident that they each produced a very different kind of knowledge. I will give two examples: In the first research setting, the lights went out for a couple of minutes due to a technical problem. That black was totally unexpected for us, the performers, because we had relied on the lighting technician and the computer. It happened while I was marching together on stage with another performer, Annika Scharm, and we were explaining the rules of marching. Being partly night-blind, I was totally lost in the space, while Annika was still able to orientate herself, guided by the emergency lighting. Normally, I would have stopped

moving immediately, but since I could follow the other moving body next to me, we continued our marching and talking in the dark for quite a while till the lights went back on (without breaking the frame of the performance). Apparently, marching as a body technique was also capable of guiding and steadying bodies in an extreme situation. This was a very interesting outcome of this research project and an enriching experience.

The obstacle in the second research project had a totally different quality: On the day of the performance, heavy thunderstorms, strong winds and rainy weather made it first seem impossible to do the performance at all. But during lunch time, the weather became a little bit better, so we decided to go ahead with the performance. But of course, not as many participants as we had expected showed up. This meant that there were too many objects for the number of people and that some of them had to carry several objects (which were quite heavy). Therefore, the formations that involved people carrying garlands could not be performed (each garland was supposed to be carried by five people). Thus, the overall aesthetics became much messier and more chaotic than intended⁶ – also in an interesting way, because participants did not only perform their prefigured roles but appropriated and interpreted the format of the march in a way that was different from what I had expected beforehand. In the end, however, I was unable to answer one of my research questions for this set-up, namely how objects can help structure a group of people so that a formation is created. As I did not have the opportunity to repeat the performance, this question had to remain unanswered in my research project. On the other hand, however, this incident made it clear once more how fragile public events are and how dependent they are on conditions beyond your control – which is also the case when you work on direct actions in public space, where you try to plan scenarios that can easily be impeded by all kinds of expected and unexpected incidents. What this ultimately means for participatory performances in public space is that, in comparison to theatre performances,

they have a huge potential as set-ups that are closer to the socio-political realities they investigate, but that the researcher has to consider that the contingencies inherent in the performance situation might lead to unexpected developments as well as results.

¹ German title: *Marching Session I – VI* _____ *Interaktive (Lecture-) Performance für Mit-Läufer und Schritt-Macher*. Project description and photographic documentation available here: <https://lizrech.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/project-description-marching-session-i-vi-kl-engl-2.pdf> (accessed 18 August 2020)

² German title: *Hallo, Marsch! Kollektive Walkingperformance für Mit-Läufer*innen und Schritt-Macher*innen* Project description and photographic documentation available here: <https://lizrech.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/project-description-hallo-marsch-sept.-2017->

³ Hunter summarizes four ways in which the term 'safe space' is used in performative settings: 1. With regard to the physical qualities of a particular place, 2. to describe metaphorical safety in which discriminatory activities are barred, 3. as a "desired space of familiarity": "The space becomes safe as it becomes known", 4. as limited by special "rules of engagement" (Hunter 2008: 8).

⁴ The rehearsal is here seen as a research method in which knowledge is produced by and with participants of the rehearsal. In German, the term '*Probe*' ('rehearsal') is related to the verb '*probieren*' ('trying out'). This '*Probehandeln*' ('trial act') is generating a certain knowledge, which is based on experience, in particular bodily experience (Matzke 2012).

⁵ I am referring here to experiences within other moving assemblies, where actions were performed in public space, such as actions by the artist-activist collective Schwabinggrad Ballett (<https://schwabinggrad-ballett.org>; accessed 18 August 2020) and the Megaphone Choir in Sylvi Kretzschmar's research project *AMPLIFICATION! A Collective Invocation* (Hamburg, 2013), in which I took part as a dramaturg and performer.

⁶ Video documentation available here: <https://youtu.be/geaTKVkl-HU> (<https://youtu.be/geaTKVkl-HU>) (accessed 18 August 2020)

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