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## ART IN ACTION WAYS TO SOCIAL REDISCOVERY

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Creative Actions (CA) – Art in Action can be used to create new public spaces, i.e., city places where new physical experiences of self-expression and social rediscovery can take place, and city spaces where these experiences are made possible through new media communications. CA produces public spaces where people get the chance to experience their feelings, tune into their intuition, and express themselves via movement or SMS. Of course, CA is not psychotherapy, but with art projects of this kind we can offer people alternative, new ways to act, to move, to regard things, and change their perception of each other and of the world around them. When CA encourages people to turn themselves upside-down, it affects not only their perceptions of themselves but also of others. Thus, a movement for social rediscovery - how we relate to each other and use public space - can begin.

### **Creative Actions**

Under the auspices of the project Creative Actions (CA), I have worked from 2004-2009 with performative strategies in the global public realm. I am a Danish artist who uses the methods of Art in Action – exploring participatory installations or participatory actions and the ways in which art can be used to create situations where people get in touch and meet each other throughout the urban environment.

This essay presents working examples of several Art in Action methods: “Collective Strings,” “Jungle Strings,” “SMS Tour,” “Interactive SMS,” and other Creative Actions.

#### **“Collective Strings” - Turning Upside Down**

When you pull strings through space, something happens inside your body. One becomes aware of the body, pulses, and new feelings. New paths and bioresponses will appear. This project involves social feelings of freedom and the use of common spaces.

Fig. 1. “Collective Strings NYC,”  
participatory action (5h)  
Central Park, New York.  
May 20, 2007.  
Photo by Jess Pillar.



### **Cheating my head with a roll of white cotton string**

I have developed “Collective Strings” as a participatory creative way for people to sculpt public space in a free movement, tracking colored strings in traces across public space and between city structures. The project began with my own need to move and express myself in new ways, cheating tricking with a roll of string in order to begin playing in public spaces. I wanted to stop taking the same but efficient route from A to B and to find forgotten pathways and new traces in my mind and body as I moved through the city. I was curious to experience myself from a new angle, to open a new space inside me, and feel something different. I wanted to capture time in motion and the actions of my body and mind in synthesis as they worked together. I was adamant that the experimental character of art was necessary for change and personal development (Larsen 2008).

#### **A mirror-effect. A city space for self-expression.**

In Cape Town, South Africa, my personal cotton tracks were turned into the project “Collective Strings.” I wanted to challenge the existing public space and at the same time open up a social space between people. I wanted to create a space where people could get in touch with their surroundings and with each other (Larsen 2008).

Starting in Cape Town in 2005 as part of the Night Vision Festival, and also in a street laboratory working with art students, I invited passersby to take part in the action, tracing public space with strings. During the three weeks of urban explorations in cafés, private boarding schools, public trains, city squares, and major thoroughfares, an entire spectrum of emotional reactions was expressed: from surprise, happiness, excitement and joy to strong feelings of anger. The string interventions were mirroring people’s mind-sets about the particular urban spaces involved.

#### **Exploring physical ways of moving oneself and each other.**

During four days in 2006, 85,000 people took part in

the Roskilde Festival, the biggest rock and cultural event in northern Europe. While there, they expressed themselves in the jumping, moving, throwing, and weaving of 210,000 meters of colored string, woven among 70 wooden columns installed in a pattern that mirrored the map of the festival.

“Collective Strings” culminated in New York City in 2007 with interventions in five different places and parks, encouraging people to express themselves in public and thus setting the stage for shared situations throughout the city. People expressed themselves physically in many ways, even standing on top of each to form a skyscraper. “CS NYC” was a collaboration with Seattle-based performer and artist Jasmine Zimmerman.

#### **Outreach to the so-called periphery**

“CS” continued in midwestern Jutland in October 2009, where residents of the small villages Bækmarksbro

and Velling and I made tracks with strings among city elements. This event was part of the Culture Caravan, which visited seven “periphery” villages with fewer than 1,200 inhabitants each during the Darkness Culture Festival, [www.moerket.dk](http://www.moerket.dk)

#### **From half-way house Lysholmgård to Kunsthall**

A string has two ends: How do we play together? How can we gain more space for the physical body, emotions, and curiosity as we relate to other people? How can we use our public space for this purpose? In 2009 I produced “Collective Strings” in an 8-day, close collaboration with Dennis Bomgaard Glashøj, Dennis Junker, Kasper Johansen, Rickey Kristensen, and Philip Rosenstand from Half-Way House Lysholmgård.

This work was made upon invitation from freelance curator Charlotte Bagger Brandt and Kunsthall Charlottenborg, the largest exhibition space for contemporary art in Copenhagen. It was a welcome



Fig. 3. “Collective Strings NYC,” participatory action (5h) McCarren Park, New York. May 13, 2007. Photo by Lindsay Clipner.



"Collective Strings NYC,"  
participatory action (5h)  
McCarren Park, New York.  
May 13, 2007.  
Photo: Lindsay Clipner.



challenge to do "CS" inside Kunsthall Charlottenborg, a public space for contemporary art. What could I add to that space?

### **The playful adult**

I decided to create "Collective Strings" for adults' children and adolescents still know how to play together. But we adults, who have been socially regulated, we risk ignoring our physical signals and intuitions, and we think about and plan our lives to such the extent that we barely sense the "here and now." There is too little space for physical, inquiring, and emotional parts of our existence. It is disturbing. How can there be more space and time for our bodies and emotions?

I was interested to find a group that does not have the opportunity to play daily in the public sphere. A group that is cut off from freedom and community certainly can add something new to public space. Collaboration with prisoners was explored as an option. My own

"inner child" immediately said "yes." But it required deep thought before I finally decided; it is a serious responsibility to invite a so-called marginalized group to participate in a project such as this.

### **Inviting five men to collaborate**

I invited a group of five male residents of the Half-way House Lysholmgård -- an institution under the Directorate of Prison Service -- which prepares residents for life back in society after serving prison sentences. The collaboration counts in the Prison Service as an activity and requires an applicable albeit very modest fee from the inmates.

I met my five partners once before starting work. One of their jokes was, "It's jail or you" and that is true. After our first meeting, they said that they welcomed the idea and looked forward to getting started. I looked forward to meeting them again and create a room with them for eight days before the exhibition opened. We had



not tried to work together before: I knew it would not happen unless we could meet and discuss what might happen with the project.

### **Co-creation**

#### **- letting the exhibition visitors take over**

I prepared to start the exhibition by mounting hundreds of hooks into the walls plus 187,000 meters of colorful were ready for use. I believed that being in each other's company could stimulate our creative energy and create a shared perspective on the process. I suggested that we made tracks with strings to influence the movement of our visitors; guests would be invited to pull more string from hook to hook when the men and I released the work. Our interaction determined how the strings crossed and created "Collective Strings" in Kunsthall Charlottenborg.

#### **How do we judge social art?**

How should social art like "Collective Strings" be

judged? The aesthetic expression is not a measure of success; there is no perfect version of the piece. Its success depends completely on the group that plays together and the place in which it happens. Co-creation is the criterion by which I measure the success of a project. It could help my partners and I learn new things about ourselves, each other, and our world. The important thing is to create a sense of having participated, both giving and receiving in order to produce social rediscovery. In this way, it is essential that my partners feel that their aesthetic expression is valued and realized.

#### **Selected comments from Half-Way House**

"It's been a positive experience. I had not known about Kunsthall Charlottenborg before this, neither what the building contains or may contain. The string has given me more than what I thought it could have given. Completely frankly, I thought, what could be done with twenty rolls of strings? We got something wacky and

Collective Strings from Half-way House Lysholmgård to Kunsthall Charlottenborg. June 2009.  
Photo by Anders Suneberg.



cool out of it. This project has even been different than the other things Karoline usually makes, because we pulled the strings much more tightly. We gave funny names to the techniques we discovered.”

“A free pass from jail. That was what it was. I’ve often thought: What the hell I am doing here? But it has actually been okay, but nothing that I would do again, this thing with art. The string-fuss I have created has had an underlying sense to it, which is important. It should not be so abstract. The artists can get a dog to look like pie. Cordike, it should be. You can see that it is not random and it is not to be sucked as a sweet which is just thrown up on hooks. It must be tight!”

“Before I had been here, I said yes, because opportunities to use one’s creative abilities are limited to paper and pencil in prison. The string game was exciting and something I have not tried before. I have been really happy in those days

when I worked on the collaboration. Pleasant to work with my inmates with something other than what we usually do. It gave us the chance to have another kind of conversations, while we talked about how we would do this. What the hell can you create with the string? It is really quite a game what you can do with it .... And you can do much more.”

### ”Jungle Strings” – a place in motion

Transforming architecture into a public space for physical ways of moving the city.

In northern Denmark, on a narrow old street in the middle of Aalborg, colorful handmade “Jungle Strings” grew between the buildings for one month in June 2008. Cars were not able to pass and people had to find new ways of moving through the street. Passersby were climbing on and swinging and hanging from the strings. The law of the jungle took over for a while, and

43 km “Jungle Strings,”  
participatory installation  
(29 days). Tiendeladen, Aalborg.  
May 30 – June 28, 2008.  
Photo: Karoline H. Larsen.





80 km "Jungle Strings,"  
participatory installation  
(70 days.) Nørrebro Market  
Square, Copenhagen.  
July 1 – September 8, 2008.  
Photo: Karoline H. Larsen.

left a space for different joyful ways of being together, and alternative ways of testing oneself in a playful setting. It was a month-long transformation of city architecture and its use.

### **Everyday rhythms of moving the city**

For two months during summer 2008, a patch of colorful jungle sprang forth at Nørrebro in Copenhagen. "Jungle Strings" criss-crossed the biggest walls of the Nørrebro Market Square. Every string was handmade and strong enough so that adults, youngsters, and children could swing through the Jungle. Anyone who felt like moving and weaving to further develop the Jungle could participate.

### **Destructive actions - inevitable sources of energy**

I followed the activity closely, taking as many photos of reactions and creative ideas as I could. I observed everything from a hammock-like structure taking shape, to outbursts of joy and swinging in the strings. One

night, some youngsters cut down a small part of the Jungle. This was expected because many of them carry knives. But it would be worse if they did not react at all. The strings were repaired in new ways. The children made more jungle strings and used chalk to draw on the ground. Bags and other goods were attached to the strings on market days.

During the two months, "Jungle Strings" experienced constant change and movement thanks to local residents and interested passersby. The changes reflect this city different groups of citizens and the different stages of creativity: creation, destruction, recreation ... and the cycle begins over.

### **Transformed by citizens' self-expression**

The city architecture was temporarily transformed through because "Jungle Strings" encouraged the public to move differently and expressing itself in new ways. The installation experimented with the creation





"Eye-Action," performance (1h),  
South Extension Part II, New  
Delhi, March 4, 2006.  
Still clip from  
video: Christian Friis Hansen.

of public space for constructive as well as destructive purposes as natural and inevitable parts of the collective creativity people bring to the city.

### **A game in the city is never just a game**

This section shows how "Creative Actions" works with peoples' perceptions to aid in the social rediscovery of public spaces through workshops or performances and explores the use video combined with public participation.

### **An extra pair of eyes for women in New Delhi**

To what extent do people have the freedom to live their lives and behave as they wish in New Delhi? What about in the rest of the world?

In February I made twelve pairs of extra Eyes in paper and black tusch. I put one pair of on my blouse directly on top of my breasts, and I went to South Extension Part II Square in New Delhi Center in the evening to

hand out extra pair of eyes to the women only. The Eyes stared back at the men.

I knew I would meet only men on the public square. I wanted to ask them questions, not in a confrontational way, but playfully. However, I also wanted to get their opinions about why women aren't seen in the streets after 9-10 p.m. I asked them why women can't go out into the streets alone, and what it means to men when they see a foreign girl with paper-eyes wide open on her breasts, staring back at them.

I am a white, tall, Scandinavian woman; my trip to New Delhi was the beginning of a very complex story of that city's public space in the year 2006. I was told by Indians and experienced myself how Indian men stare at womens' breasts all the time, consciously or not. This is only the smaller part of what I called "Eve-Teasing by Road-Romeos" in India. Reactions ranged from staring to rape and molestation of both women

and men. I compiled a great deal of reliable information about Sexual harassment during my three-week stay in New Delhi, using as sources women's organizations, female artist/activists, foreign girls living in India, and male students. Based on this information, I chose to present "Eye-Action" in New Delhi.

### **Playing games in the park is strictly prohibited**

In Bangalore, South India, there is a sign on a park gate that says, "Playing games in the park is strictly prohibited." A game in the city is never just a game.

In the first week of collaborative, public actions on the piece three of many interventions were conducted at Cubbon Park, Bangalore, on Saturday and Sunday, January 17 and 18, 2009. This was part of the gathering of the group Social Art in the Public Realm organized by Zeenath Hasan in collaboration with students from Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology; the project was coordinated by Radha Chandrashekar and Geetanjali Sachdev.

The collaborative, public actions served as the setting for a rediscovery of the participants' states of mind, perception of public space, and the integration of their cultural and personal beliefs and desires.

### **Violent attacks on women in South India**

Shortly after I left India in January 2009, several violent attacks on women took place in Bangalore cafés and bars, where young women to meet with their friends. The attacks were motivated by a deep hatred of women and an attempt to suppress women's rights and their desire to live as free individuals. Our simple and yet strong actions during the Fear and Gender Workshop should be regarded in the light of the atmosphere in Bangalore at that time.

### **"Hair-Action" – Taking back public space**

Sitting in a circle on a Saturday afternoon with students and their teachers in the center of the gay area of Cubbon Park, I started to conduct a closed-eye

meditation. It activated the students' awareness of their inner space and boundary with its surroundings. I asked students to stay focused on their Inner Force Animal guiding a tour through the body. After the meditation, the students paired up and started massaging and braiding each other's hair. The following dialogue began to dissect fear and perceived fear; we also dissected the differences between the cultural norms internalized in our bodies and minds and our feelings, desires, lusts, and wishes. Men stared at our quiet, closed activity, and wondered what was going on.

Our transformation of the site and ourselves was strong because we used our hair; it is one of the strongest Indian cultural symbols of woman's sensuality. It also affects her privacy. It was also a strong marker of women's right to live and do as they feel and wish, without considering the cultural demands of what women should or should not do in public spaces.

### **Public space braiding**

On one Sunday afternoon, we invited people in Cubbon Park to participate in a social rediscovery of the public park. Everyone came to braid the space into colorful lanes of fabric – Sunday ribbons - opening and transforming the site into a joyful, vibrant space to connect across cultural and linguistic barriers. We invited people to hang bangles and bells on the fabric lanes, wishing for positive understanding and sensitivity. All the participants sounded their bangles and bells simultaneously. It was a ritual transformation from fear to joy. The intervention created a temporary space for new ways of dialogue between strangers in public space; we reclaimed public space through its feminization. The hierarchy of Indian castes and numerous language barriers were challenged and temporarily changed through inclusive participatory actions.

### **Beyond the presence of the artists**

As an addition to our braiding activity, the students from Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology conducted



"Say, I am" (an Indian), a performative demonstration on foot in Bangalore. They walked a certain route through the city, stopping to perform actions of daily life in total silence. These actions, the students felt, were missing from and not allowed in public spaces: hugging a friend, holding hands, or even kissing their loved ones. After the strong demonstration that reached Indians in Bangalore through reports in local newspapers and on Facebook, the students continued their own works of self-expression.

### **SMS in the city**

Sharing experiences: "Out of the darkness grows black nose hair."

In April 2009, during the 'RYK IND' open house exhibition, a pilot program of the SMS Tour was conducted at the Overgaden Institute for Contemporary Art in Copenhagen and a later version was conducted in May 2009 during the "Moving Space" performance festival in Frederiksberg. The SMS Tour ran from 30 minutes up to 1.5 hours, depending on the participants' wishes.

Each activity had up to 18 persons: 6 individuals or, with more people sharing the same mobile phone, up to a total of 18 persons received a mobile phone programmed for sending and receiving SMS to and from SMS Tour. The participants got instructions on how to use the phone at the start of the tour. All participants were sent to the local public area and told to follow the instructions of the first incoming SMS; then, they responded to the "SMS TOUR" number via SMS as often as they wished during the tour.

Participants soon started sending their own questions and comments to the SMS Tour, which were forwarded to all the other participants. The SMS were collected in a web-archive displayed live at the starting point, the Overgaden exhibition space at the "Moving Space" site. SMS Tour became a unique live gathering of communications on experiencing body-awareness

in the city. A fixed route could have easily locked the participants into a kind of "sleep-walking while being guided." In contrast, SMS Tour created a public mind space for wandering on one's own without a clear route but inspired by the SMS evoking a playfulness and a curiosity.

SMS messages from the Tour were predetermined in a charter and sent out by SMS to the participants. This made them become more physically aware of public space and collect their perceptions and stories. SMS Tour asked questions such as, "Where are your feet now?" "Bend down and touch the ground under your feet, what sensations do you get?" "Find an architectural point that is the same height as your body." They were also asked to "Make a sound in public space on something, e.g., a dustbin, or tell of a sound you notice now!"

SMS Tour was created by Astrid Lomholt, Zeenath Hasan, and Karoline H. Larsen.

### **Projected live on harbor architecture**

In October 2009 on the opening day of the Darkness Culture Festival ([www.moerket.dk](http://www.moerket.dk)), a grand-scale, 11 x 15 meter projection, called the Struer Show, was made on the repurposed oil-tanker in the harbour. The projection shifted among three parts: a local program, interactive SMS, and a magic shadow movie.

Interactive SMS made it possible for the festival audience to walk on the harbor or any other place while sending an SMS to the show phone number. Text messages were projected in real time in big format on the oil-tanker via [www.thedustb.in](http://www.thedustb.in). Our invitation encouraged people to text poetry; people would send all sorts of verse, greetings and comments. One of the most memorial was "Out of the darkness grows black nose hair." Magic shadow movie visualizes the transformation of Struer City into the magic dark night of fairy tales about animals. The movie consists of film scenes from Struer City (Venø Fairy, people

walking in Struer, Bay Sea waves, harbor of Struer, etc) interspersed and layered over with black, hand-cut paper silhouettes of animals; these were interspersed with over-layered Magic-VJ effects. Struer Show was coordinated by Karoline H. Larsen for Struer Municipality. Magic Shadow Movie was made by Karoline H. Larsen & Joe Barnett. Interactive SMS was made by THEDUSTB.IN team Zeenath Hasan, Piyush Verma, Kris Khaira, and Karoline H. Larsen.

### **Bodily and new media ways to social rediscovery**

Public spaces are not the same as common free spaces?.

My practice through Creative Actions – Art in Action has convinced me that performative strategies can plant a seed, providing space for new ways of seeing and perceiving the world, for bridging gaps and opening spaces and people into creative entities. Art can offer people new pathways in their biochemistry by turning themselves upside-down and getting in touch with each other.

Art is just one area of expression. I believe in a long-term consistent movement taking place on many levels of society. Each has different barriers and needs for exchange and rediscovery across the invisible walls of cultural, social, and economical conditioning.

(Artistic) physical ways to involve the public – producing public spaces for people's physical experiences of self-expression and social rediscovery and extending those through new media tools - can open new and alternative ways of living our lives. We can awaken and explore the process of social rediscovery.

Participatory methods developed in close relation to a society's specific needs are all-important for consistent and continuing success after the artists have gone.

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