

The Procession of the Sealed Doors: the collective as a liminal space

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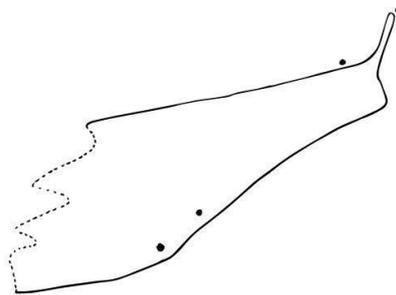


Image 1. Drawing-map of the walking path between Mouraria, Alfama and Graça. © Lise Bardou

Abstract: This essay discusses the collective as a liminal space in the urban performance *The Procession of the Sealed Doors* of French artist Lise Bardou, which occurred in Lisbon on February 12th 2020. A group of culture workers, where I was included, were invited to walk through a detour of construction barriers, urban renovations and abandoned buildings in Lisbon that, in turn, were activated with art installations and the praising of Janus, the roman god for trespassing doors and unseen worlds. Lise Bardou calls the collective to trespass and face the neo-liberal landscape of Lisbon. I go through collectivization as the dynamic infra-structure of this performance, unfolding several directions from its liminal space (the collective walk). In the first section (.map), I introduce the details, modes and materials of the Procession and address space as practice, inscribing the collective making with the city critique, the public space, and situationist strategies. In the second section (.procession), I dive into the materials and modes in use for this collective walk, problematizing its urban possibilities, the diy aesthetics, and ritual and movement as a set for the production of meaning. In the third section (.sudarium), I focus on one of the performance installations to think trespassing and squatting as liminal spaces and their action in empty buildings, squares or enclaves of the city. I use an interdisciplinary methodology to write this paper based on my direct participation in the performance, in interviews with Lise Bardou, as well as a theoretical corpus of philosophy, urban and culture studies.

Keywords: Lise Bardou; Public Art; Spatial Practices; Urban Politics; Lisbon

.map

The performance *The Procession of the Sealed Doors* took place on February 12th, 2020, in Lisbon, as an urban performance designed and choreographed by French artist Lise Bardou¹. It took the shape of a collective walk linked by four location points between [Mouraria](#), [Alfama](#) and [Graça](#) — which are contiguous districts in Lisbon. Each of them stands as altars of the *Procession*, where construction barriers, urban renovations and abandoned buildings were activated with art installations and the praising of the Janus icon. The starting and end point were in the same street, Calçada de Santo André in Mouraria, and it was clear since the beginning that we were diving into a ritualistic performance: at the moment we arrived, Lise Bardou stamped the image of the map we were about to perform in everyone's wrist, raising an initiation movement into a walkers' community (Image 2). At the same time, she sang a litany to Janus, the roman god of passages and doors to other worlds, electing an icon for the opening movement suggested by walking and praising in the altars. With an *in-situ* approach, Lise Bardou activated these spaces through a beautiful Janus sculpture made of light contours, which in turn was projected by a stencil and a small flashlight carried by her. Lise Bardou invited a small group of art and culture workers to cooperate in the creation processes of the performance and extended the invitation to a larger group for the happening of the event (Image 3).

¹ *The Procession of the Sealed Doors* has an obvious connection to Lise Bardou's research on rituals, trances and tarantism, and also to her artistic practice focused on public and private spaces. That research is the core of her masters thesis *Transe et Tarantisme* (2016), and unfolds in the video-installation in Cemitério dos Prazeres *Danser Sur les Cigales* (2016) or in the video *To go Around* (2017) mapped from the *Procession of Our Lady of Health*, a traditional procession whose starting point is precisely in a major square just beside the small church of Mouraria. The relation with the city and the political position of Lise Bardou as an artist is also visible in the organization of *HorsLits* in 2019, in Lisbon. This art event is an urban itinerary of exhibitions, performances and installations, had its first edition in Marseille, France, and has been circulating through different cities in Europe. The logistics involves everybody in the art making game since the production is carried out between inhabitants of Lisbon. The artists temporarily occupy private apartments so they can create and show from each specific space. By their side, the owners or tenants help and produce the creation and the full event. In doing so, collaboration and collectivism are the means of production of this urban itinerary that plays with the realm of private and public space, as well as the commodification and touristification of art residencies in the European capitals.



Image 2 © Lise Bardou



Image 3 © Lise Bardou

By the first moments of the performance, we needed to position ourselves with each other and the map we were about to perform. We were urged to face together the walled façades of Lisbon, which are part of the materiality of gentrification, touristification and real estate financeirization processes. *The Procession of the Sealed Doors* intended to unfold a criticality and tried to act as a spatial practice in the growing private space of Lisbon, while making a collective. I am dialoguing here with space as a criticality, as implied by Henri Lefebvre (1994) when he addresses it as a practical critique, a way of knowing the reality and simultaneously as knowledge production, an epistemology in practice. The way you get to know space is to experience it while producing it (LEFEBVRE, 1994: 17). His Marxist ground problematizes space as an historical process (LEFEBVRE, 1994: 16-72) in which urbanism is a tool of power, a way for capitalist accumulation and distribution. Within the same ground, space production addresses the social relations of the immediate reality since, in his words, “things lye” and “tend to set themselves as absolutes” (LEFEBVRE, 1994: 81), as such we need to look for the liminal space of criticality. This still stands more than ever to understand space as a social production and to imagine other sets of relations, and other possibilities for the shared reality-space.

The liminal space of the *Procession* is also public in the sense that it is political. I am thinking of public space with its premise of “space of appearance”, the collective practice by which Hannah Arendt states the politics in the space “where I appear to others as others appear to me” (ARENDR, 1998:198). This public space is constituted through collective action (and speech) around a common purpose or project (ARENDR, 1998:199). The collective action as public space assumes other vectors with Judith Butler’s when she argues on the context of “massive demonstrations” and “modes of resistance” which took place with the Arab Spring and the 2008 financial crisis around the world. In particular, the philosopher states that “public space now occurs in the midst of another action, one that displaces the power that claims legitimacy precisely by taking over the field of its effects”(BUTLER, 2011, s.p.). The appearance of the bodies to each other is itself, for Butler, an action, a political act, therefore, a space of appearance is constituted by a “performative exercise” that happens “only between bodies”, whose political action is the collective public location that emerges precisely from “the between” space (BUTLER, 2011, s.p.).

So, *The Procession of the Sealed Doors* is a performance (practice) of public space since it is a space of appearance of precarious culture workers, but also, in Arendt terms, it aims to intervene in matters of public concern, such as urbanism, city policies and modes

of social art practices. It is also a manifest claim of space for space's sake, against the regime of property and profit that designs Lisbon.

But where does Lisbon lie/lye? What lies behind the barriers, the renovation urban projects and the walled buildings (Image 4) ?



Image 4 © Lise Bardou

The former inhabitants were displaced by the raise of rents and tourism's logics of temporary rental. Many buildings are empty, walled in their façades, and being used as an asset in financial operations of international stock markets. Lisbon is deserted of inhabitants but full of people in transaction and transition with the extractivist movement of tourism. The real estate and tourism landscape has become the hegemonic space of Lisbon mainly after the TROIKA privatization-earthquake in 2013². As Roberto Falanga and Chiara Pussetti underline in the article "Practices of Citizenship and Real Estate Dynamics" (2018), "during the so-called 'post-crisis era', private investments boomed and increased constantly" in Lisbon (FALANGA & PUSSETTI, 2018: 107). Concrete measures like "the Golden Visa program, negative Euribor taxes, tax easing and the opening of bank credits" contributed for this new private urban design of the city (FALANGA & PUSSETTI, 2018: 107). It was clear that it was put in practice by "the creation of an attractive image of the country and its main attraction poles (Lisbon, Porto, Nazaré and Algarve)" (FALANGA & PUSSETTI, 2018: 107) .

² Regarding this topic, please see the article by Luis Mendes (2013).

Within this urbanist transformation of Lisbon there was also an increasing artistic production that turned to situated walking to do a critique of this urbanism as a neo-liberal spatialization. Lise Bardou's urban performance dialogues with others of its kind, such as the *movement as critique* in public space from [c.e.m.](#), the urban researches and archaeologies from [Joana Braga](#), or the poetics and politics of movement from [Julia Salem](#) or [Sara Anjo](#). So, walking turned to be a distinct and frequent medium of deconstructing and drifting in this new touristic Lisbon, finally a capital of Europe.

The conflict area of drifting can (still!) be understood with Guy Debord's agitation and practical philosophy and art. Debord's drifts and psychogeographies are conflict prepositions which face and challenge the irreducible distribution of the hegemonic space. By staying within the negative space as the space of criticality, drifts and psychogeographies are produced under constant dialectics, conflict and negotiation. This negative space is also a poetic one, it is here that Debord thinks drifts as the "fluid anti-ideology language", since it is funded in its own constant and "present critic" (DEBORD, 2021: 130)³. A situationist poetic space involves a new language, a production of meanings with the critique of society, which can address a syncretic process of artistic and political practice. Understanding this preposition, we can also acknowledge the generative dimension of a spatial practice as critique. Criticality is not a denouncement or a protest closed by the social relations of a space. Instead, it is an ontological enquiry that creates a divergent materiality within the dominant social space. It has an agency of its own that opens views, possibilities, and actions; it is poetic, in the philosophical action of making worlds (matter) out of language (words, artifacts, gestures). With this understanding, the *Procession of the Sealed Doors* should be seen as a complex and poetic infra-structure that necessarily produces a negative social space (a poetic one) within its situationist practice.

. procession

*God of all thresholds, of all passages, of all private and public doors
of departures
and returns
of the openings through which the lights penetrate the houses
Janus opens, Janus trespasses*

³ This and all other quotes from an original in a language other than English are rendered in my translation. The original reads: "O desvio é a linguagem fluida da anti-ideologia. Aparece na comunicação que sabe que não pode pretender deter nenhuma garantia em si própria e de modo definitivo. Ele é, no mais alto grau, a linguagem que nenhuma referência antiga e supracrítica pode confirmar [...] o desvio não fundou a sua causa sobre nada de exterior à sua própria verdade que ele transporta." (DEBORD, 2021:130)

By nine o'clock at night, when Lise Bardou initiated the *Procession*, she immediately distributed the codes for the collective making: the nocturnal gathering, the restrict invitation, the map and its stamp, the icon, the stencil, the litany, the compass, the light, the images prints in flags. All these elements offer the group communal codes as a way of collectivization, assuring the internal grounds of its relational infra-structure. The processes of production of these materials are also intentionally overexposed, turning "the making" into a key element of the installations, of the appearance of the icon itself, and also of the collective walk. The *lo-fi* materials accentuate the popular set of the ritual, which in this case, is not made by any religious parish community resources, but by *an urban community* expressing a specific *diy* strategy in Lisbon (Image 5,6,7). As Sarah Lowndes (2016) explained, in urban context, *diy* culture manifests a modest economy of means and materials, a non-profitable position, and a small scale mode and means of production (LOWNDES, 2016: 263). The use of low-cost materials and the self-organization of the performance calls for what Lowndes establishes as an "aesthetic of necessity", which stands as a position against the profit and accumulation of dominant economic forces in the artistic practices, which are intertwined with the city making (LOWNDES, 2016: 263). One of the most radical possibilities of *diy* culture is the *Do it Together (DIT)*, that urges from an attempt of escaping from art mercantilism and the authorship politics in arts (LOWNDES, 2016: 263-265). In doing so, the *lo-fi* materials and the DIT mode expand the *Procession* as an urban practice with a political position on its own production.



Image 5- Janus stencil projected at a small square in Alfama © Lise Bardou



Image 6- Janus stencil projected at the small hole of a walled building © Lise Bardou



Image 6- The stencil model for each Janus image projected on the walls © Lise Bardou

As we extensively know from the creative class theory⁴, there is an established dynamic between the economic development of a city area and concentrations of artists, musicians, and/or LGBTQI+ communities (Lowndes, 2016, XVI). The Portuguese geographer Luis Mendes questions these dynamics, and addresses specifically the countries of the south of Europe, where this so-called “creative class”, are in fact “marginal gentrifiers”: people living with precarious housing and precarious jobs in the city center, with a high level of formal education. These persons, among them artists, are not wealthy consumers and tenants and the creative class implies, on the contrary, that they usually engage with urban processes of cooperation, solidarity, collectivism and *diy* strategies, which creates a tension with the mono-urbanism of neo-liberalism. These strategies can be understood as emancipatory urban practices (MENDES, 2012: 59-63). From another point of view, Ana Estevens in *The Neoliberal City: Art and Conflict in Lisbon and Barcelona* (2017), argues that in Lisbon and Barcelona even the artist’s Bohemia is a value of trade in the city as a product and brand, implying a direct relation with the so called “multicultural” and “creative city” (ESTEVENNS, 2017: 77). Taking the ambiguity between art and creativity, Estevens states that the art interventions in the public space are not a sufficient condition for social transformations, and that they often take part in the capitalist illusion of a democratic and diverse city (ESTEVENNS, 2017: 77)⁵. She also underlines the role of the institutional use and approval of art practices of community making and citizen participation that maintain the *status quo* of the city through the illusion of intervention in the public space (ESTEVENNS, 2017: 75-76).

I do think that it is with full awareness of this feeding between art, artists and city branding, that Lise Bardou’s *Procession* disturbs this dynamic. In the *Procession of The Sealed Doors*, the public art is *secret* although communal and collective. A certain refusal of the “public” performance should be understood with the self-organization mode, the *in-situ* provisory installations, the avoidance of presence marks, the circulation of internal codes, and the trespassing of legitimate property.

⁴ In 2002, Richard Florida wrote *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, where he states a new class for the 21st century, the creative class (such like architects, designers, artists, et), that have a direct influence in the urban development of the city, and therefore in the economy.

⁵ The original reads: “Esta animação permanente oferece aos habitantes a impressão de serem capazes de se apropriar do seu território, partilhando um sentimento de suposta comunidade. Esta idealização de cidade como território de idealização cultural cria a ficção de uma utopia [...]. Neste contexto, a ilusão intencional de um certo ambiente artístico, a que se associa um estatuto social privilegiado ou formas boémias de vida, é a base do desenvolvimento de estratégias urbanas.” (ESTEVENNS, 2017: 77).

It is in fact, and again, the collectivization process that feedback the materials in use and produce its meanings while constituting the *Procession* (the collective). The procession is the body (and performance) that situates the poetic and negative space of the map. It is a collective reconfiguration of a religious ritual that enables the trespassing of property within a popular culture setting. The possibilities of meaning production between movement and pilgrimage are addressed by Rebeca Solnit in *Wanderlust: The History of Walking* (2014), in which she sums a sacred geography that inscribes visibility to the work of the spirit (SOLNIT, 2014: 50). Thus, *The Procession of the Sealed Doors* sculpts Lisbon as matter, in a process of transfiguration of the city and the walker, taking place between the walk and the specific space, between “sight” and “site” (Image 6). The litany, the *in-situ* installations and the walking movement create a common “sight”, turning the private property into a public space with a passage suggested through the ritual. As Solnit points out, the “sight” is *thought* that is produced with *meaning* connected with *space* (SOLNIT, 2014: 8). Therefore, the movement is “about how to invest universal acts with particular meaning” (SOLNIT, 2014: 3), which in this case turns out to be a collective meaning given by the procession ritual. In the *Procession*, the embodied practice is a collective one, thus criticality is brought into the performance by the act of *walking together* and trespassing the façades. The configuration of a collective body as a subjectivity is itself a substantial part of the space production in the performance, it calls for a collective positionality through the exercise of putting ourselves in relation with others while making public space in Lisbon. This body in pilgrimage is also an ecstatic one, in the sense that each one of the participants is exceeded by the collective body in action⁶, while producing public space (Image 7). It follows that the “ecstatic” collective is the technology of the performance but its ontology urges from a specific proletariat body, since we were all art and culture workers, living, as Luis Mendes argues, in precarious houses and with precarious jobs, insisting on staying at the city center and dealing with its neo-liberal urban transformations and façades. Again, the ecstatic proletariat body accentuates a political and public dimension in this secret *Procession*, while trespassing together in “the forbidden terrain of community bonding” (GIELEN, 2001: 7).

⁶ Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette acknowledge the “ecstatic” quality of the modernist painting by an implicit collectivist desire. For the authors, modern art already implied something larger and more powerful than the individual, the author, or the artist. After Modernism and avant-garde movements, collectivism has become a social and artistic practice itself (SHOLETTE & STIMSON, 2007: 9), with an aim for direct intervention in the society, giving also place to a collectivism that, as Allan Moore argues, is an expression of the artistic labor itself (MOORE, 2007: 216).



Image 6- Janus stencil projected in the small hole of a walled building © Lise Bardou



Image 7. *The Procession of the Sealed Doors* walking down the stairs from Graça to Mouraria © Lise Bardou

As I pointed out before, Lise Bardou would project a Janus icon under a progressive and clearer definition of its image in each installation. Thus, the stencil of light was a major element in the act of “trespassing”, it stood for the consistent and repetitive element of

the ritual and gave a structure to the walk and to the other multiples of the *Procession*. The stencil projection also interacts with an urban art that calls for political action through images in murals, posters or graffiti in the city walls.

The Portuguese researchers Cristina Pratas-Cruzeiro, Helena Elias, Catarina Valente and Tânia Cortez made a practice-based research called *Memory on the Walls* focused on archives of Portuguese political murals from the post-revolution period, and their present site re-enactments. They highlighted “the mural practice” in Portugal as “deeply rooted in the ideological sphere” until the 1980’s (PRATAS-CRUZEIRO, ELIAS, CORTEZ, VALENTE, 2021: 441), and after “the birth of graffiti in Portugal [which] turned the attention back again to the wall”, reinforcing the discussion of the public space, where “the urban mural resurges again, whether attached to the cities branding or to projects that look for citizen engagement” (PRATAS-CRUZEIRO, ELIAS, CORTEZ, VALENTE, 2021: 441). As such, they consider urban art a way of acting with the “materiality of the city”, “while proposing different levels of interaction and participatory dimensions” (PRATAS-CRUZEIRO, ELIAS, CORTEZ, VALENTE 2021: 434).

In the *Procession*, the provisory stencil of light definitely engages with the mural as a space of protest, political agitation and/or propaganda. By refusing the permanent mural and embracing the “sight”, the provisory stencil enables the collective making in their immediate presence, rather than the tag, stencil, mural, etc. By disorienting these urban artistic practices, this strategy ensures the political effects of the mural while escaping the city branding appropriation processes. The stencil also activates the altar “sites”, acting on the city as matter, by giving space to *the openings through which the lights penetrate the houses*, and alluring the potency of the collective trespassing “*Janus opens, Janus trespasses*”.

. sudarium

The third stop of the procession pays a funeral tribute to the artist [Julio Bernardino de Oliveira](#) (d. 2019). The picturesque square was once an abandoned building squatted by him. His squatting and artistic production were both born from the fundamental right to housing and work. His murals marked the building squatted by him, whose vibrant colors and expressive shapes would call every “sight” passing by. Side by side with the murals, the ruins of the squatted houses were turned into installations possible to be seen from the outside and experienced from the inside just like labyrinths of sculptures, found-objects and paintings.

His art was made with the material surplus of a city under construction, it was literally made of detritus renovation works; of furniture that would come from population displacements and evictions, and other work materials that would be left and abandoned in the streets of Lisbon. He earned money from direct donations of passers-by to his work, even integrating tourist guide circuits focused on “urban art”, which can take us to other different levels of debates and discussions regarding this delicate situation (Image 8).



Image 8- The building where Julio Bernardino de Oliveira lived and worked © Lise Bardou

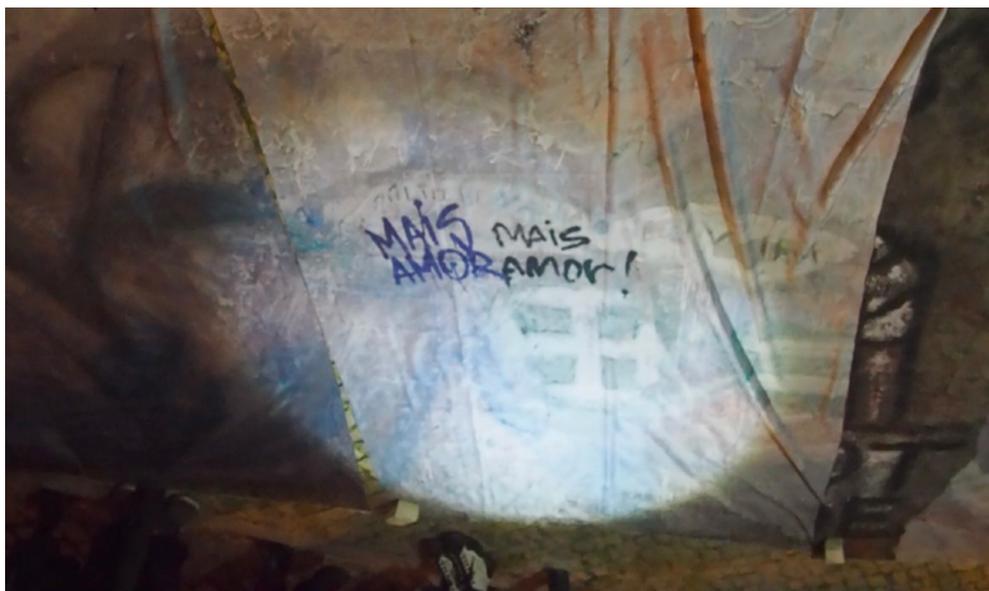


Image 9- The reenactment of the building and the image imprints in the flags , now playing at the floor of the square in Alfama © Lise Bardou

Lise Bardou had known Bernardinos's work, like much of all of us did just by passing by that city area. Here, at the present and picturesque square between Alfama and Graça at Rua Santa Marinha, we laid down three large flags with the spectrum-image of the squatted building (which previously stood there). Again, by laying a sudarium of the previous squatted house of Bernardino, we transformed the picturesque and touristic plaza into a place of critical injunction for the collective, calling us to the recent urban transformations of the city, along with the full presence of our trespassing and assembling around Bernardino's squatting and his contiguous art work. This reenactment also establishes a connection of the mural with the square as political topologies of the city.

If the mural once represented and fixed the façades for propaganda, protest and political agitation, after Tahrir (2011), Gezi (2013), Zuccotti (2011), Plaza del Sol (2011), Syntagma (2012) or Rossio at Portugal (2012), the square is the space for communing and expected political encounter, in which those actions can occur. Stavros Stavrides (2021) mentions the transforming potency of the liminal spaces like those, as they are "mechanisms that rule and give meaning to passage acts" and can become tools to "escape the urban order which normalizes the city of enclaves" (STAVRIDES, 2021: 115). According to the architect and activist, this potentiality arises from common space, as an open process of questioning the dominant designs for living together (STAVRIDES, 2021: 113), of reappropriating the city through this politics. Therefore, the liminal spaces are "inventive" and are "active catalyzers for the city re-appropriation processes as a common world in becoming" (STAVRIDES, 2021:114). So, ironically, the touristic plaza is brought in *The Procession of The Sealed Doors* as a liminal space of trespassing by a juxtaposition of time and space, by which we can experience squatting as a political memorial and further possibility for the empty buildings of Lisbon.

. litany

Our lives are based on an extreme movement towards survival, and art workers are inevitably wandering from financed project to financed project, sometimes (like in Portugal) without social security, without fixed housing, without a fixed country. When walking/movement is not a choice of circulation but of obeying, how can we fix practices that work against this discipline of urban and art systems?

Perhaps permanence and its movement can turn to be the most radical *choreopolitics* in the struggle for the right to the city, for the collective production of alter-spaces. I am thinking of "radical permanence" as argued by the Italian artist and

researcher Marco Baravalle, by which he addresses the connections between the art market and the making of the neo-liberal cities, focusing on the example of Venice and its Biennale. He introduces a critique of contemporary mobility where he problematizes "the ability to collectively organize permanence, to build alter-institutions, to create autonomous cultural and democratic infrastructures in the places we live in" (BARAVALLE, 2020: s.p.).

The circularity of the procession's itinerary took us back where we started, and we gathered at the end of the steps leading from Largo da Graça to Calçada de Santo André where Lise Bardou finished her litany to Janus. A towel opened on the floor at ten o'clock at night, we sat down, ate and drank wine. We exchanged phone numbers, agreed on future projects, talked a lot and for a long time about what it is to live with and from the voracious transfigurations of the city without ceasing to occupy, to stay, in the most specific sense of staying as a critical movement. How can we produce a social space (trespass) and slow down the city transactions and transitions?

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