

INTERVIEW WITH KITT JOHNSON

Kitt Johnson is a dancer, choreographer and the artistic director of *X-act*, one of the longest existing, most productive dance companies in Denmark. Kitt Johnson in a collaboration with 12 performers created the project *12* for Metropolis 2015.

When did you start working “outside of the black box” and why?

Well, it was a very specific situation of ‘need to’ rather than anything else. It was very early in my career in the middle of the 80’s, and I was not even what you might call a professional. I was travelling in Europe and I needed money, so I decided to try to do something in the street. I was together with a friend in Paris and soon we decided to turn this street performing into a laboratory.

What I found and still find thrilling is the fact that creating work for non-conventional art spaces means anchoring your work in an unprotected reality, a reality that does not need you and thus you are forced to become really sharp on your choices. Your role is not given, you have to invent it. This often brings about thematics that you would not have found in the protected art space.

You have worked yourself on site-specific work and also created works for and with other artists. How is your process when you find a place that you want to explore? Do you have a set methodology, timetable, or how is this structured?

I work with mapping and often define a conceptual way of working with a specific place. I have a flexible methodology with the same three core ingredients in this “mapping”: *The Walk – The Talk – The Archive Dive*.

I always walk first. This can be planned and very structured along lines or systems, or it can be a derive, where I wander and am lead by intuition and incident. It can last a few hours or all day. Sometimes I work with the concept of a 24 hour stay as well in order to be immersed in the environment and sense the different situations through the day and night.

I then engage in a dialogue with the place and its inhabitants. Again, this can be informal. Speaking with people I meet in the streets, in shops or in backyards. It can also be appointments set up with people who know about the place and have insight and knowledge from various perspectives.

The archive dive is what I can resource – on the web, in books/libraries, gathering information and statistics, plans and historic maps. It gives me the framework for the project. These mappings give me knowledge covering geography,





topography, geology, architecture, ownership, social economic hierarchy, demographic structure, psycho geography, personal and collective memory, functions of the place, mythology, history, phenomenology, sensorial character, conflict zones, conflict themes and so on.

I note all these things down in my notebook, and I share these observations with the participants/performers or others engaging in the project. I also mix them up and restructure them, of course. This is in fact a huge sharing exercise. Having read all this, it then dissolves gradually into the work.

What is it that interests you about working in non-conventional places in general?

I actually do work in formal places too, and the range of these places includes shops, parking lots, formal squares and even shopping centres. So it can be extremely codified places where it is challenging to break the codifications or behaviour and open people's eyes as to the in-between spots or the hidden places within these often stereotype places. One is always looking for the hidden potential.

I am aware that in some places my own body would not function, so it is also a question of fitting and being able to link to a place identity. This can be a situation of harmony or of antagonism, but there must be a dynamic present. Otherwise it does not work. I know where my strengths are, and I also know my limits.

This leads to a question of how you think we orientate ourselves in the city and how we negotiate with the city as humans/citizens/guests. Your approach offers an alternative, sensorial approach where the city as we know is perhaps dissolved, and where the city as a vision/illusion/memory comes to life. Is this also a comment on how we go about trying to give places an "identity" and "function" but in fact we may be losing the essence of the city?

The sensorial approach serves as an opening of the senses. It is really just a tool for becoming present in the world, in a here-and-now, in a specific place. The sensorial is our channel

to a larger consciousness, giving us the possibility to change routine and unreflected behaviour in the city. This approach allows for an empowerment of the individual.

What kinds of places or spaces interest you and how do you find them?

I am attracted to places that carry many layers of information, of imprints, of historical as well as contemporary imprints of lived life. As well as places that have a strong mythology, sometimes one-sided, sometimes distorted – how to reopen a discussion on its actual identity and to point out potential new identities. If a place is also terminal, it makes it, in my eyes, even more interesting. You can give it one last tribute as well as a critical eye on the circumstances of its termination. Such spaces are found by just being alert to the surroundings. I feel quite strongly about the nature of permanence and fluidity in our society, and so I often find myself drawn to places, which are on the edge – of change, of the city, of defined territories. These are spaces that may disappear. History and heritage are super important. We have to act responsibly in the world, and by positioning art in such places, we are touching on sensitive issues where often no one else questions the development. This was in fact particularly clear with the work on Refshaleøen, which is a unique place in Copenhagen that invites us to consider another, softer and more sensitive, approach to change.

Cultural acupuncture is a term I often use. Do you see your work in this term?

Yes I do. I have made projects in Nørrebro for example with Mette Ingvarsen, where she created a magical garden amid drug dealers and Romanian criminal bands, who took over a playground. By a soft, playful counteraction, we made the park once again open and accessible and changed the flow of the place. I feel that we planted seeds, which hopefully will grow. So yes. Understanding precisely where the key issues create potentially dynamic situations is important for the dramaturg of the city.

Do you think that experiencing a work in a site-specific

environment adds a layer of “reality” which strengthens the experience, as that one is “immersed” in the situation and not just “watching” the situation?

On a physiological level one will always be immersed in a situation. Our mirror neurons and central nervous system will ensure that. It takes an act of will not to be immersed.

Speaking about reality, it can sometimes be so demanding on our senses that it actually leaves only a limited space for the ‘situation’ to take place. In such a case, it is up to the artist to design a work that embraces this specific reality. One creates a (performed/imagined) space within a (real) space, but there must be a relationship, and this is always complex and layered of course. One must find the right balance between the real and the imagined.

Speaking about the sensorial, I see this as an opening or as a pathway. Not as a goal in itself. Opening the senses allows you to perceive more broadly. This state allows the performer to take audiences into other mental spaces.

Audiences react differently in public space, and the relationship between the audience and the performers is also dynamic. However, it does create a kind of breaking point to be freer and to have more interactions. I am getting away from the formal idea of audience and actor. There is an exchange in public space and a juxtaposition, and we can go in and out of this situation.

The position of the local – and the local people – is a key factor for me. When we perform in public space, we are also speaking about territories. There are clearly issues of ownership and power structures in public space. Everything is in fact territory. I feel that I have ownership of the small public park by my house and the space I park my bike. The bench across the road is occupied by drunken people every day at the same time, and they have ownership. So in every situation one must identify these territories. I believe in trying to negotiate ownership, so I must enter a dialogue.

I need permission to do certain things. I worked on Blågård Plads, and local youths started to annoy us when we were

rehearsing. They were obviously bored and started throwing small stones. They were also defending territory. However, when I quietly told them that we had talked to Atilla, who was a key figure in the local youth culture, they immediately became helpful and friendly. It is about building relationships and getting beyond the stereotyping.

So the process of creating work in public space also becomes part of the ‘piece’ as I see it. Where does the art start and where does it end, that is not at all clear. It is a shared space and a shared process and a dialogue in both senses. Site specific does not quite cover this. Perhaps situation specific is a more precise name for it.

Can all artists work in the public space, or are there specific criteria and a specific attitude that is a pre-requisite? I am thinking here of the performance “12” you created for Refshaleøen for Metropolis Festival 2015 with 12 individual performers.

As regards the performance 12, this was a very special work. We invited artists with various skills and techniques. Many of the prerequisites are the same as working in a black box actually. This is also a space you must know. However, there must be a willingness to meet reality and not impose oneself on the place. And you must be open and prepared for dialogues, also with the other actors, as each voice has to be particular but also part of a whole. In such a situation, my role is as a guide, mentor and prompter. The process started by each of the 12 actors finding ‘their’ space in the terrain, and from these specific points of reference, we started.

There is a clear trend that artists are reengaging in society, and the public domain is a key aspect of this. Do you sense this?

Art trends or movements come and go. Yes, art is deeply related to society in that art is a reaction to human and social conditions, so of course art has a role to play in society. Thus there is this movement at this time in particular, when many artists are engaging and reacting as human beings first and as artists secondly, I feel. It is an act of empowerment.

