

Public Intervention as a Teaching Method Report

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Description of the teaching/learning method

Public Intervention as a teaching/learning method departs from an interdisciplinary framework in which the travel of concepts and ideas from one field to another is encouraged and the social impact of academic knowledge production is a constant concern. Students are asked to design an experiment in public space in light of the theme and the readings of the course, which is followed by a group presentation in which students report their public intervention in class by using relevant theoretical and visual material. It is a pass/fail assignment, conducted by the students in small groups, attempting to trigger students' imagination and creativity in order to translate theory into practice. Students are given detailed instructions to design their public intervention in small groups of 3-4, in which they interact with other people and with the urban space, organize a collective action/experiment outside the classroom, which is followed by a report/presentation in class. The interventions attempt to find the traces of theory in public space, as well as analyzing and intervening the public space with the help of theory, in a collective and interactive manner.

Below is an excerpt from the Cultural Analysis: Case Studies (part of Bachelor Literary and Cultural Analysis) course manual in which the Public Intervention assignment is introduced to the students.

“We would like you to go outside of the classroom, into the streets, and conduct your own “experiments,” inspired by the readings in this course. If Amsterdam is a living archive, consisting of multiple and conflicting residues, how might you creatively intervene in the city’s consciousness of itself? What kinds of representations or discourses make up a space and its historicity, and what happens when you tinker with those representations or discourses? How, in short, might we translate theory into practice?”

Go out into the city and explore its cultural geography using the many archival tools available to you. Using primary materials from the archives we have considered in Case Four, you can create a situation; write a manifesto and hand out copies; intervene; add something to the urban environment; amplify ambience through recording and projection; interact with people; add a glitch to the flows and frames that condition the city’s archive, etc. Make pictures, videos, drawings, reports, and bring those to class where we can share them in short 20 minute reports.

We encourage you to do this together, in small groups. Be creative, don't get in trouble. Try to do things that can be theoretically supported by the readings that we have been looking at.

In short, translate theory into practice - and have fun.”

Purpose of the teaching method

Public Intervention as a teaching/learning method aims at designing and implementing creative, challenging and productive tasks within the learning environments. It attempts to create bridges inside and outside of the classroom, online and offline learning environments, institutional and public spaces. Through their involvement in public space by way of intervening into it, whose form is informed by theoretical discussions in class, students are expected to have a heightened awareness of the social/political implications of academic knowledge production. This improves students' ability to explore the social and cultural implications of the theories dealt with and improve their collective thinking and acting skills. The main goal is to contribute to a learning environment in which students connect theory and practice, perceive themselves as active agents in the society, and get prepared for the various tasks they will carry out in the cultural and social realm in the future.

Literary and Cultural Analysis program aims at developing the intellectual knowledge and skills to interpret and reflect on literature, art, politics and popular culture by using various methods of analysis and key theoretical concepts. In this program, as well as in various other programs in the Humanities, one of the main goals is to contemplate on the relationship between theory and practice. As soon as students find ways to "implement" theory in their everyday lives, they become more engaged in the program and pursue it with more enthusiasm and commitment, discovering their creative skills and contemplating on the ways in which they are involved in their environment as active members of the society. Critical thinking skills, when accompanied by practical tasks which focus on interfering and transforming everyday life and public space, are enriched and sharpened. Interaction, performance, storytelling and play, as tactics informed by theory, become part of the learning environment through this method. Therefore, implementing public intervention as a teaching method, in which the students are asked to form groups and organize events/situations/experiments in public space, in line with the theories addressed in class, will contribute to making students establish further links between theory and practice and get involved in the learning process in a much more active way. Hence, this method could be of interest to lecturers and students in cultural studies, literary studies, media studies, art history and philosophy.

Previous Implementations of the teaching method

Public Intervention method has been implemented in the course *Against Culture* (part of Bachelor Literary and Cultural Analysis, elective course), which aims to develop familiarity with the theoretical perspectives regarding modern and contemporary radical-political theory and in the course *Cultural Analysis: Case Studies Culture* (part of Bachelor Literary and Cultural Analysis), which offers a general introduction in the theory and practice of cultural analysis. I am planning to implement the learning method in *Cultural Analysis: Case Studies* course in 2020, the related material of which will be uploaded on the Public Intervention website (publicintervention.humanities.uva.nl), in order to create a growing archive of this learning method, with the aim of inspiring and informing its implementations in the future in the context of other relevant courses.

Against Culture (current name *Aesthetics and Politics*) is a course focusing on modern and contemporary radical theory in the domain of culture, with an emphasis on the Situationist International and related movements that advocated the rejection of ‘culture’ as part of their radical critique of ‘the society of the spectacle’. We examine how the Situationist International and other radical currents theorize the relation between politics and culture; culture as commodity and instrument of separation; and the possible integration of art and everyday life. In particular, we explore how these movements develop modes of anti- and counter- cultural insurrection and subversion. We address tactics like psychogeography, détournement, adbusting, culture jamming, and media activism. Works by Guy Debord, Henri Lefebvre, the Invisible Committee, Jean Baudrillard, Sadie Plant and others are closely read during the course. The introductory course on *Case Studies: Cultural Analysis* offers a general introduction in the theory and practice of cultural analysis. In this course, students continue their encounter with cultural analysis by embarking on a series of case studies, which are assembled around a cluster of cultural objects, media, and genres. Case studies consist of a number of different theoretical, historical, and political approaches of one and the same object and students practice how to navigate those different approaches and their resulting interpretations and analyses and how to add your own perspective. Below is a selection of public interventions designed, realized and presented by the students in the context of these two courses.

Rebuilding Singelgracht (Course: Against Culture)

Rebuilding Singelgracht

In 2018, the Singelgracht renewal will start. The canal will be drained, filled and rebuilt into the new Singelstraat - this will simply change it from canal to street.

The Singelgracht Renewal is part of Amsterdam2020, a project to optimise Amsterdam for the growing flow of tourism. The project changes parts of the city from 17th-century infrastructure to modern and vibrant shopping streets. The renewal means more space for tourists and more space to enjoy Amsterdam!

Amsterdam currently has 165 canals.

Tourist world city

The renovation of Singelgracht is the first step to facilitate 25 million tourists enjoying the beautiful city of Amsterdam in 2020. Currently, around 18 million people visit every year.

Amsterdam is about sharing memories and history, and we, therefore hope to see you again in the new 2020 version of the City. Enjoy great food, go for a casual walk or visit the vibrant nightlife on Singelstraat!

This Singelgracht water marks the end of the old and start of the new.

We hope to see you in 2020!

Rebuilding Singelgracht public intervention is based on interacting with tourists in Amsterdam to introduce them the so-called “Rebuilding Singelgracht Project” designed by the municipality, which aims to optimize Amsterdam for the growing flow of tourists. Students approached tourists by pretending that they are municipality officials who give information on the project, which the students designed for the purpose of the performance, in the streets of Amsterdam. The project is described as follows in the hand-out the students distributed: “The project changes parts of the city from 17th century infrastructure to modern and vibrant shopping streets. The renewal means more space for tourists and more space to enjoy Amsterdam. With this project, the canal will be drained, filled and rebuilt into the new Singelgracht, which will transform the canal into a street.” The tourists are asked their opinion and given a small bottle filled with canal water as a souvenir. During the intervention, various conversations are held with the tourists and passersby about the current conditions of the city, the increasing number of tourists in Amsterdam, the gentrification of the city and possible urban policies that deal with or fall short in tackling with these issues. These conversations, with a humorous and critical tone, aim at questioning and discussing the consumption-oriented and gentrified structuring of the city and the municipal policies’ capacity in addressing the increasing touristization and commodification of public spaces.

The intervention is inspired and shaped by the Situationist International’s urban theories (“Formulary for a New Urbanism”, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography”, “Proposals for Really Improving the City of Paris”) and the concepts they have developed in their writings, such as “psychogeography” and “detournement” (in Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 2006). Translating these theories into the contemporary urban

setting has allowed the students to revisit and reevaluate the theories and concepts themselves, shedding light on their efficacy and explanatory power today. Students recorded their conversations by getting permission from the people they interacted, photographed the objects they used, such as the small bottles filled with canal water, and distributed the flyer they prepared during their presentation of their theoretical and practical findings.



Huis van Bewaring (Cultural Analysis: Case Studies)



Huis van Bewaring public intervention aims at analyzing the historical and cultural significance of Max Euweplein in Amsterdam, in relation to the city's "cultural archive", as the main building crossing the square was the first prison built in Amsterdam, in 1850. The building was then used as "waiting rooms" for Jews during the Nazi occupation of Holland, in which prisoners were made to walk around the square. During the intervention, students interacted with the passersby and with the people sitting in the surrounding cafés and restaurants, who were mostly unaware of the history of the square, with the attempt to reveal hidden pockets of history in urban space. People who are interacted with are asked to take a walk around the square by following the circular route the prisoners once used to pace back and forth. The performance, which the passersby become part of by strolling around in the now highly touristic area full of cafés and bars, attempts to reveal hidden layers of history in the city and increase the awareness of the cultural archeology of the city for its inhabitants.

The intervention is inspired by Denis Cosgrove's seminal text "Geography is Everywhere: Culture and Symbolism in Human Landscapes" from (*Horizons in Human Geography*, 1988), in which Cosgrove argues that landscapes carry symbolic meanings that can be read as "texts". Another theoretical inspiration for the intervention was Lauren Berlant's *The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times* (2016), which is used to discuss the ways in which infrastructures of the past inform or mystified by the present infrastructures and what an awareness of the interaction of multiple infrastructures in the city can lead to. Students discussed the tactics through which they tried to create a rupture in the daily rhythm of the city, which raises questions about the relationship between the past and the present, by showing clips of their conversations and strolls with the participants in Max Euweplein.

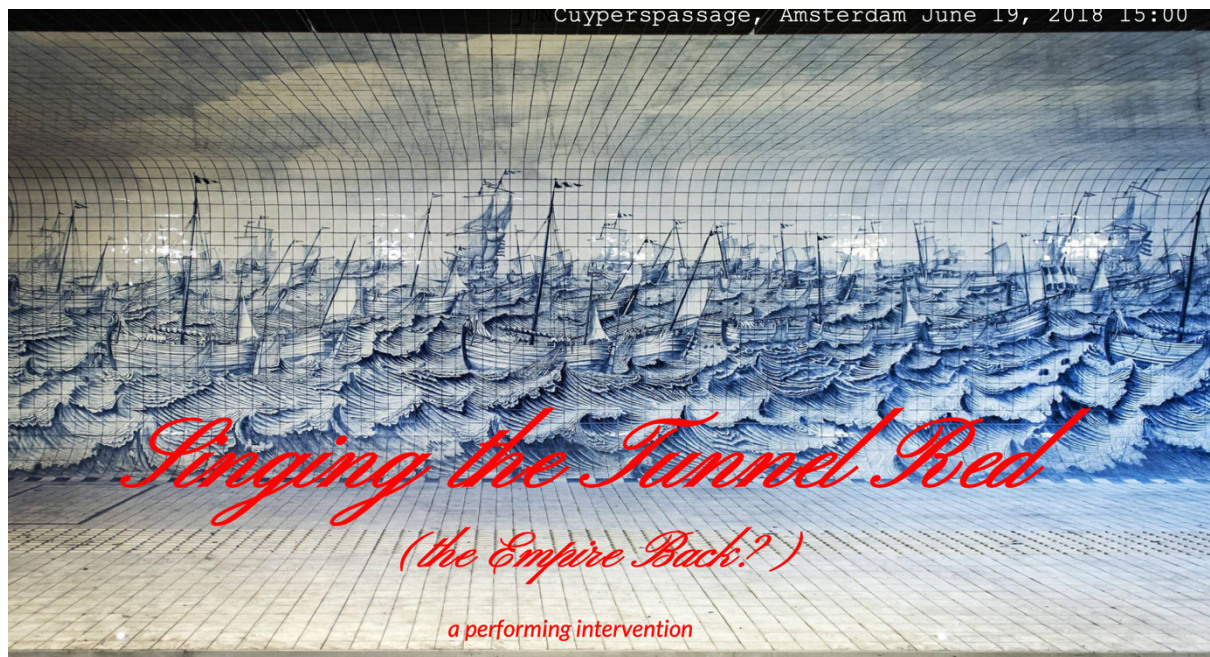
Society of the Spectacle: Canteen de Board
(Course: Against Culture)



Society of the Spectacle: Canteen de Board public intervention explores the interaction of “the public” and “the private” in the university space by focusing on the signs in the university canteen at PC Hoofthuis in Amsterdam. Inspired by the recent occupation and appropriation of the university buildings against the budget cuts, privatization and financialization of the university, the privatized university canteen is taken as a case study to explore how the students can become more active in shaping the study environment. The images, signs and slogans in the canteens at PC Hoofthuis are analyzed and transformed; a flyer on the current condition of the university is left in different places in the building for other students to become part of the discussion. Chalks are left on the walls for other students to write on the canteen boards. Price tags are attached to the objects in the canteen to raise questions on the commodification of the university environment.

The intervention is informed by theories on commodity culture and “play” as a political and transformative tactic, including Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and Situationist International texts (“Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday Life”, “A User’s Guide to Détournement”, “Détournement as Negation and Prelude”, “Report on the Construction of Situations” (in Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology*, 2006). During the presentation, students showed a series of images of the transformed images and signs in the canteen space, discussed the efficacy of resignification in learning environments and the immediate effects of commodity culture in our everyday lives.

Singing the Tunnel Red (Cultural Analysis: Case Studies)



Singing the Tunnel Red public intervention takes the The Cuyperspassage, a traffic passage at Amsterdam Central Station that connects the city and the waters of the IJ-river, named after the architect of the Rijksmuseum and Central Station, as its focus. Along the footpath wall, there is a tile tableau designed by Irma Boom Office, based on a restored work by the Rotterdam tile painter Cornelis Boumeester (1652-1733), depicting the Warship Rotterdam and the Herring Fleet from the collection of the Rijksmuseum. The intervention explores the affinity of this image with the Dutch East India Company shipyards and attempts to explore the colonial traces in the city. Students wore red costumes during the intervention, which formed the colors of the Dutch flag when combined with the blue and white colors of the tiles depicting the fleets on the walls. They sang children folk songs in the passage and recorded their performances.

The performance questions the ways in which national identity is embedded in everyday life, as well as different ways of relating with the cultural objects produced by the city. The notion of “flagging” in Michael Billig’s *Banal Nationalism* (1995), the exploration of the cultural significance of daily activities and pedestrian tactics of resistance in Michel De Certeau “Walking in the city” (1984), questions concerning the Dutch sense of self in Gloria Wekker’s *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016) and the role of images in W.J.T. Mitchell’s *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (2005) are among the theoretical inspirations behind the intervention. The presentation included a rich theoretical analysis that led to the preparation of the public intervention and the presentation of the relevant visual material.

Information on the website

On the Public Intervention website (publicintervention.humanities.uva.nl), more information on the previous public interventions by the students can be found. The examples from the *Cultural Analysis: Case Studies* course in 2020 will be uploaded on the website to create a growing archive of public interventions and theoretical reflections on the learning method and the relationship between theory and practice. The website can be used as an archive to illustrate possible practical implementations of literary and cultural theory while introducing the program/university, and as a platform on which students communicate and inspire each other. The website also aims at inspiring similar learning methods designed to combine theory and practice, especially in humanities programs, where the social implications of the theoretical insights developed throughout the courses deserve special attention and scrutiny.