

Theatre of Life | *Paris, the Garden as a Social Public Space*

I am interested in the use of this social space that can become relational. How can human interactions be evoked in public space and what does it look like? Is there a way to observe and register these fleeting moments and to create a blueprint of the characteristics of its behaviour? When I came to the conclusion that the jewelry pieces were too loaded to give away in a social context with a stranger I started to think about objects. Even though objects also can contain emotional value I'm rather inclined to say that they are more naturally understood in terms of utility. Because objects seem to be less loaded and associated with intimate relations, they are more inviting to use in a social context as a means to connect people.

Looking at the encounters I had even before I started making the gesture I realised that the most memorable and enduring encounters took place in the gardens of Paris. This made me wonder if there was something particularly inviting to prompt interaction that could have initiated these chance encounters. The French formal garden with its artificial styles and structures is an extension of the boulevards interwoven as an important part of the aesthetics and daily life of the city. They appeal to the notion of beauty and enhance the enjoyment of one's surroundings.

As a result of the information I gathered from the research of my encounters, I questioned if there was a relationship between the cultural history of the city that defined its décor and people's willingness to interact. Like Haussmann's renovation of Paris, the influence of the Belle Époque, impressionism, fashion and flânerie. Walter Benjamin theorised the 19th century figure of the "flâneur" as an emblem of the changing city and the contemporary use of Parisian public space. How do these historical elements influence the way people use public spaces, in particular the gardens as a social space.

The city has ushered in and spread the hands on experience; it is the tangible symbol and historical setting of society, that “state of encounter imposed on people”, to use Althusser’s expression contrasting with that dense and “trouble free” jungle which the natural state once was, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a jungle hampering any lasting encounter. Once raised to the power of an absolute rule of civilisation, this system of intensive encounters has ended up producing linked artistic practices: an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the “encounter” between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning.²⁰

Hausmann’s renovation of Paris changed the facades of the buildings, the layout of the streets and green spaces, which transformed the city into a metropolis. At the start of the Belle Époque in 1871 Paris was an inviting place where the Parisian bourgeoisie and nouveau-riches were ready to venture to the city. Paris where haute couture was invented was the centre of the Belle Époque; here fashion began to move in a yearly cycle. The impressionist movement as avant-garde in the 1860’s became more prominent during this era due to independent exhibitions. The subjects in their paintings were landscapes and contemporary life. It was photography that inspired impressionists to represent momentary actions - the fleeting moments in the everyday life of people. Impressionist painting often resembles a snapshot; a part of a larger reality captured as if by chance. Photography inspired impressionists to represent transient moments - in the fleeting lights of a landscape and in the day-to-day lives of people. Rather than competing with photography as a means of absolute representation, artists focused on the further development of the conception of subjectivity in the image as an art form.

20 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p.15

Artist like Jean Béraud made paintings of fashionable people strolling the beautiful contemporary boulevards of Paris, depicting detailed urban scenes of modern life. Béraud turned these public spaces, 'the realm of the flâneur into arenas for social interaction'.²¹

In Benjamin's words:

It is the gaze of the flâneur, whose way of life conceals behind a beneficent mirage the anxiety of the future inhabitant of our metropolises. The flâneur seeks refuge in the crowd. The crowd was the veil from behind which the familiar city as phantasmagoria beckoned to the flâneur. In it, the city was now landscape, now a room. And both of these went into the construction of the department store, which made use of flânerie itself in order to sell goods. The department store was the flâneur's final coup. As flâneurs, the intelligensia came into the market place. As they thought, to observe it - but in reality it was already to find a buyer. In this intermediary stage [...] they took the form of the bohème. To the uncertainty of their economic position corresponded the uncertainty of their political function.²²

The flâneur enjoys unbounded access to the city and these citizens of Paris were the subjects of many impressionist compositions. In *Place de L'Europe*, 1875 by Béraud, the décor of the painting is a newly completed residential district in Baron Haussmann's quartier de L'Europe. These recently widened boulevards and intersections offered the possibility of social interaction with its accompanying ambiguity. This is seen in the painting in the gaze of the man glancing at the (compared to his female companion) fashionably dressed woman in front of him. The impressionist paintings focused on the new boulevards to represent modernity instead of the impoverished or industrial areas of Paris.

21 Gloria Groom, *Impressionism, Fashion & Modernity*, (Chicago: The art institute of Chicago, 2012) p. 165

22 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Rolf Tiederman (Harvard University Press, 2002) p. 21



Jean Béraud, *Place de L'Europe*, 1875



Édouard Manet, *La Musique aux Tuileries*, 1862

The garden was an extension of these boulevards. One of the early examples of impressionist painting named *La Musique aux Tuileries*, 1862 by Édouard Manet is immediately linked to the subject I want to discuss, namely the public gardens of Paris. In particular Jardin du Luxembourg and Jardin des Tuileries in which the latter is the décor of Manet's painting. Captured in the painting is the atmosphere, fashion and leisure activities of the park. There is one element in particular that I am interested in presenting pertaining to this painting, that is the object that is still a beloved element of the gardens today only in a modern version: the chair. In this painting Jardin des Tuileries is the décor for a gathering of citizens as if it is the living room of Paris. This notion is accentuated by the presence of the chairs, that give the space a more home like feeling and flexibility.

As in the work of Marcel Duchamp and in the work of Joseph Cornell, chance played an important element, which also appears in relational aesthetics. I would like to propose that this is also the case with Jardin des Tuileries and Jardin du Luxembourg, despite the fact that these gardens in Paris are formal in their set-up, I realised that there is an important free element within the framework of the park. While in most public spaces the elements to sit or relax are at a fixed place, the chairs in these gardens are scattered all over. This leaves it up to the people who are present, to create the setting in which they like to engage and adapt them to their needs within the constraints of the space and the availability of the chairs. This element stimulates social interaction in an intimate and even broader set-up. Whether you have lunch with colleagues, relax with a book after work, gather with friends or simply watch the life in the park after a walk through the city like a contemporary flâneur.

The possibility to pick a preferred spot is not only a way to make efficient use of space, hereby I mean in terms of enjoyment of the circumstances in the garden, like the choice of a view, preferences weather-wise (sitting in the sun or in the shade for instance) but also evokes the smallest forms of social interaction. A simple greeting combined with the question if a seat is available starts the most basic level of interaction and invites one



Chairs in Jardin du Luxembourg and Jardin des Tuileries, 2013

towards a relational space if it is wanted. The relational space is mediated through the presence of the chair. In this situation I like to see the chair as an object that can be a vehicle for human interaction. What could this chair tell us about the use of a public space as social space?

The people and chairs create patterns of the way we have or haven't related to each other in a social context. The chairs leave traces of our use in public space. They become little portraits as a silent witness of human behaviour. They create a map of the garden as a social space. I would be interested to see the shifting patterns during the development of the hours of the days, the weeks and months as well as the shifting of the seasons. As a contemporary observation from above like in Monet's painting *Boulevard des Capucines*, 1873-74. I imagine these scenes given by tools of modern day technology like Google Earth, that would offer a possibility to record the movements for a year during the opening hours of the park.

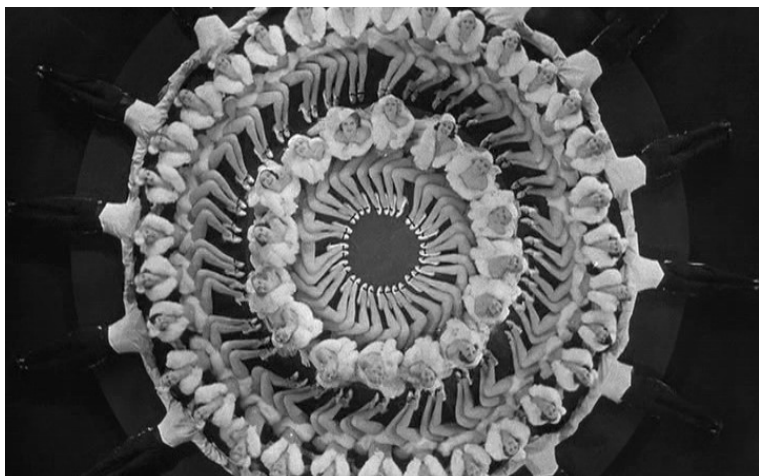
These records will give an account of the created movement pieces as seen from above like in Busby Berkeley's kaleidoscopic choreographies. Only here we do not see the aesthetics of the uniform movement of the people as a result of choreography. Instead the movement will be directed by the space and pattern of the French formal garden. Although these spaces decide the common routes combined with the tendencies of people to behave like herds of animals, the recalcitrance of unorganised movement will be stimulated by the presence of the chair that can be moved freely in space. People dragging them from one place to another to find the perfect spot alone or in a group will bring people beyond the intersections and the predetermined walking paths of the park; it is an invitation to criss-cross where without the chairs there would be more or less a tendency to move in a linear way.



Claude Monet, *Boulevard des Capucines*, 1873-74



Close-up, fragment of Jardin des Tuileries as seen from above in Google Earth, 2013



Film still, *42nd Street*, kaleidoscope like choreography by Busby Berkeley, 1933



Film still, *Dames*, kaleidoscope like choreography by Busby Berkeley, 1934



Jardin des Tuileries, as seen from above in Google Earth, 2004



Jardin du Luxembourg, as seen from above in Google Earth, 2004



People carrying chairs in Jardin du Luxembourg, 2013

It is the efficiency of today's society that "ideally" would like us to move in linear lines, not to lose time and go for the target. We became so goal oriented that the idea of "travel is about the journey" is transformed into "travel is about the destination". We have to get from A to B and there is no room for wandering around. For that reason alone the chairs are in themselves a welcome change in public space - without even thinking about the social and relational space at the moment - simply because they follow their own efficiency of movement outside and against that of today's society.

The chairs also invite people to stay in the garden, not only to take rest from what it is that they were doing, but to provide comfort; the garden becomes the outdoor living room of the city. It asks us to slow down, to take time to be in the present, once this happens there is a bigger chance that we will become aware of our surroundings and the people who share this space with us. When there is no rush it will be easier to engage in a social context within the public space. In this regard I am interested in the portrait of human relations concerning the chair and how people interact with one another. To capture the human characteristics of the everyday, the "infraordinary" in these public gardens like in Georges Perec's book *An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris* to capture as he puts it "what happens when nothing happens."²³ This also serves as a reincarnation of the impressionist movement and chronicles what contemporary life in these gardens looks like one and a half century after *La Musique aux Tuileries*.

The chairs in Tuileries and Luxembourg are as objects separated from the commercial world. They are not part of commodity trade; everybody in the park can use them and they are therefore a gift for any visitor to these gardens. Because the chair does not belong to a commodity trade, it relates to the gift and community and therefore might enhance the feeling of belonging and open people up to a state of encounter.

23 Georges Perec, *An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris*, trans. Marc Loewenthal, (Cambridge: Wakefield Press, 2010) cover



Traces of social interaction in Jardin du Luxembourg and Jardin des Tuileries, 2013