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# Experiencing the Infra-Ordinary: The Power of Imaginative Spaces

Tereza Stehlíková / Katja Vaghi

## Abstract

Examining *The Infra-Ordinary Lab* (IOL), a site-specific participatory performance that invites participants to a multi-sensory exploration of the 'genius loci' of Holešovická Tržnice, this article explores the importance of active, imaginative, and embodied experience in performing arts, in contrast to our increasingly screen-based lives. It questions the hierarchy of our senses and highlights some of the historical context behind this. It discusses the politics of drawing attention to the 'infra-ordinary aspects' (PEREC 2008) of our surroundings and the vital importance of protecting the wild space of our imagination and our freedom to 'feel', outside of the dominant consumer narrative. The article is written in a form of a dialogue which reflects various aspects of the projects in a deliberately multi-faceted, fragmentary and rhizomatic way.

## Key words

virtual spaces, ephemeral spaces, site-specific, participatory performance

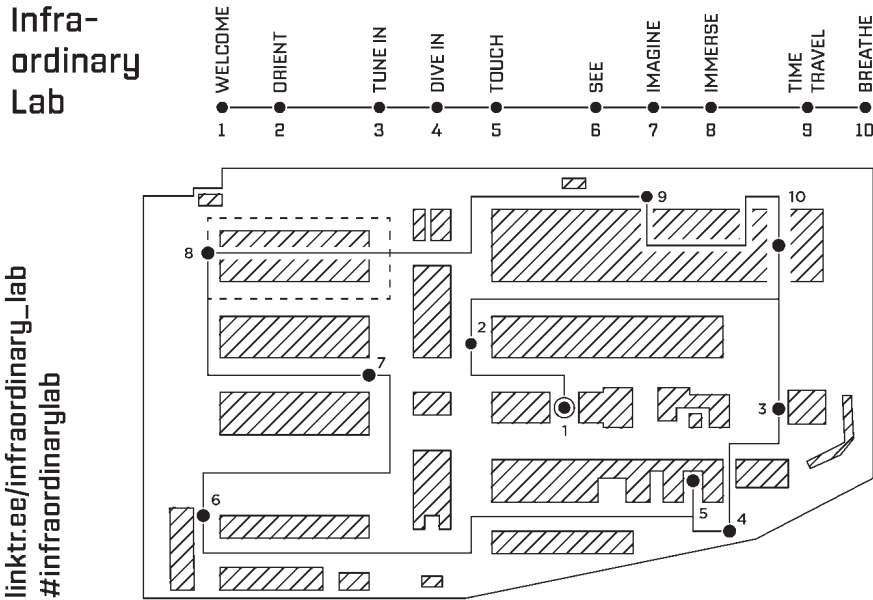


Fig. 1: Map of the walk.

## Description and contextualisation of the project

*The Infra-Ordinary Lab (IOL)* is a site-specific participatory performance devised by Czech artist Tereza Stehlíková as part of the 2023 Prague Quadrennial. The performance invites its participants to a multi-sensory exploration of Holešovická Tržnice in Prague, Czechia, and site of the Quadrennial, framing perception and peeling the skin of the everyday to reveal hidden narratives. Its specific intention is to enable participants to connect more deeply with the ‘genius loci’ of Holešovická Tržnice, originally an abattoir, now a culturally listed area which functions as a shopping place, through all their senses. The aim is to establish a more informed, more visceral, embodied but also emotional connection with the site, while also opening a reflective, meditative, and internal space which enables the participants to form a more profound relationship to it. The resulting participatory performance is framed as a ‘laboratory’, which invites the visitors to become part of an experiment of reframing perception of everyday reality and situating oneself within it, by the simplest analogue means, a kind of return to childlike playfulness and immediacy, yet informed by other layers of meaning.

The project has been a direct response to the recent pandemic and the shift towards more disembodied, digital interactions. The intention of the performance is to return the participant to the here and now, into their own body, as the most powerful, sophisticated, and direct mediator of reality and locus of meaning. The project also builds on Stehlíková’s ongoing cross-disciplinary research into how we experience places and

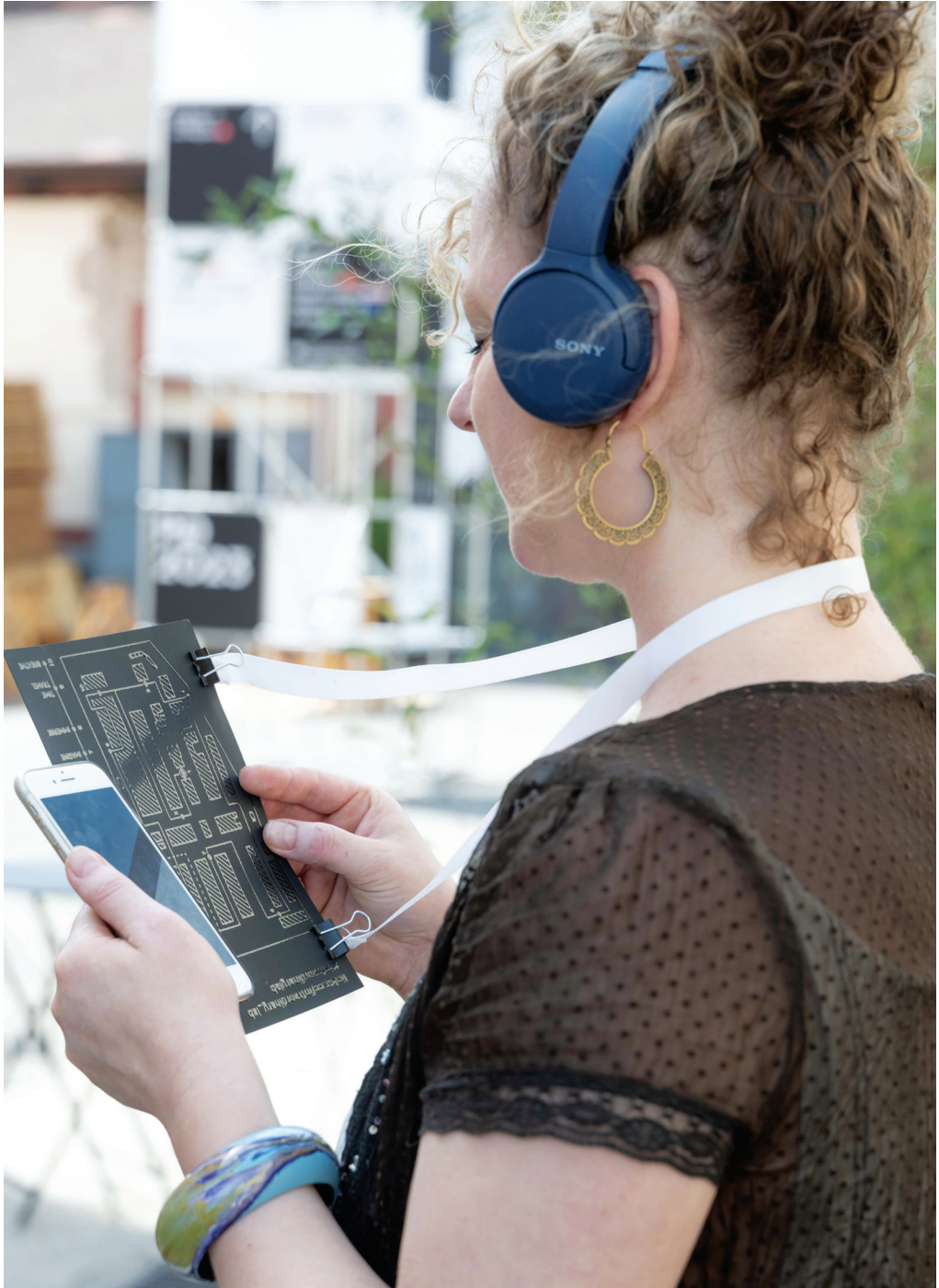
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Fig. 2: *Infra-Ordinary Lab* base. Photo: Karel Komorous.

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**Fig. 3:** Participant with a map. Photo: Karel Komorous.

spaces, the idea that the external environment shapes our emotional and psychic landscape and at the same time becomes an extension of our inner worlds. This powerful embodied dialogue occurs when we walk across spaces, encoding understanding into our bodies while in multi-sensory exchange with the environment. But this dimension lacks to a greater or smaller degree in digital environments, where spaces are virtual, representational, and sensorially two-dimensional. This question of physical/direct experience versus digital/mediated experience also stems from Stehlíková's background and sensibility as a filmmaker (hence working in an intangible medium) and comes in interesting contrast with Katja Vaghi's dance background and theoretical sensibility. Vaghi took part in the event as a performer. It is the relationship between these two modes of experience that are an important part of the discussion here.

*The Infra-Ordinary Lab* experience takes the participants into the peripheral areas of the market, as well as into parts of the functioning interiors (i.e., the food market hall selling fruits and vegetables, or the electronics retail store, showcasing the latest technological devices). It introduces them to some of the historical facts, as, for example, when it served as an abattoir, while also giving them a sense of their own orientation within the larger environment of the area and of the city. This is done with the help of a map, as well as 10 audio tracks, available both in English and Czech, corresponding to 10 stops on the map (see Fig. 1). Each of the stations offers a particular focus, summarised by the following, invitations to: *orient, tune in, dive in, touch, see, imagine, immerse, time travel, breathe*. The performance also includes interventions from laboratory assistants (performers) who offer participants the opportunity to experience part of the journey without a reliance on sight, by entrusting themselves in their hands, blindfolded. This is an intervention that is offered between two specific stations on the map. This intervention comes in response to the idea that it is important to challenge our over reliance on vision, at the expense of other senses. What happens when we temporarily disable vision? It turns out this opens another space of experiences, inhabited by our other senses. The participants' journey is thus both within the visible world of the market, and invisible, within the space of their imagination.

In this article, we offer a dialogue between an artist and theoretician involved as a performer in the work which has no clear hierarchical order of importance (marked in blue for Stehlíková and in red for Vaghi). Grouped under loose 'sensory threads', our voices offer a kaleidoscopic multiplicity of points of view, fragments of a tapestry of quotations and thematic echoes, poetic and philosophical, subjective, and analytical, reflective of the organic and associative openness of the creative process which was inherent in the development of the work. In this rhizomatic text, no section takes precedence over another. It is rather to be understood like a map made of clear paths and detours, of specific landmarks and in-between spaces, which we visited during the process of research and the process of performing IOL. The form deliberately reflects the openness of the creative process: it emerged in response to a public space, whose meaning was never fixed, where objects moved, pathways were suddenly obstructed, and new doors opened. This openness in the process was conveyed to the participants by inviting them to be equally free in their own meaning making, influenced by loca-

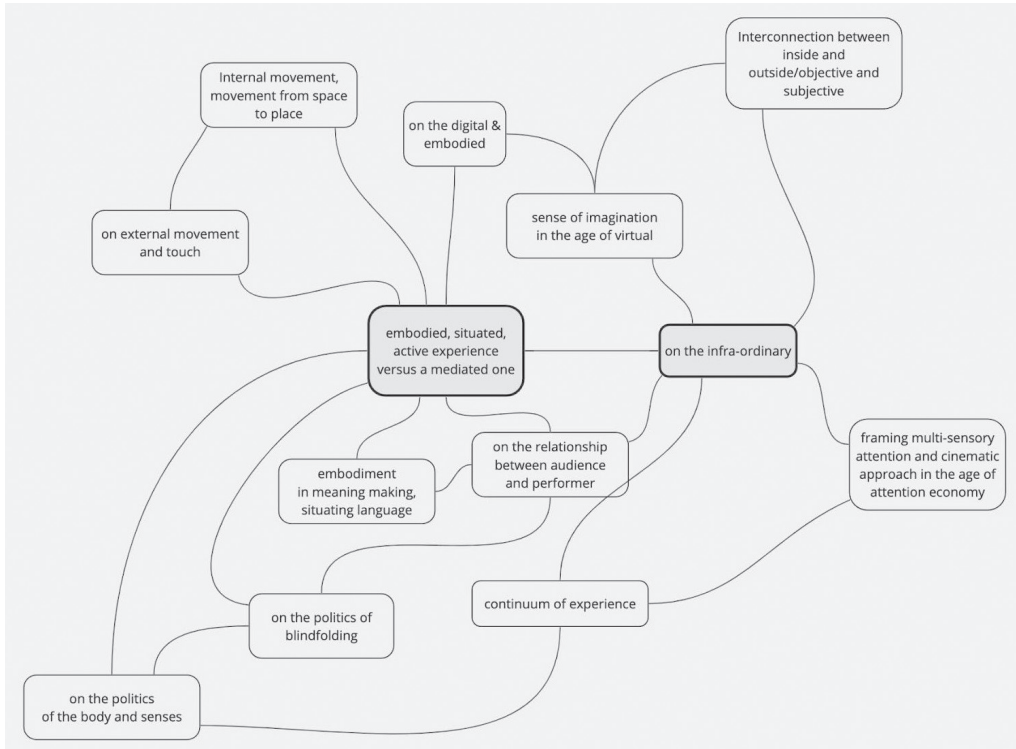


Fig. 4: Map of thematic threads.

tion, their inner state, and the time of the day as much as the narrative. We wanted to convey this kind of openness to the reader through the form of the text. And although the resulting text is multi-faceted, there is also a clear common thread: one that ties together reflections on the politics of the senses, of bodies (human and animal), and also the implication of the performance format.

## Embodied, situated, and active experience versus a mediated, representational one

If you are trying to decide what is more important, to trust the experience of the eye or the experience of the body; always trust the body, because touch is an older sense than sight and its experience is more primary. Apart from that, in our contemporary audio-visual civilization, the eye is rather tired and 'spoilt'. The experience of the body is more authentic, uninhabited by aestheticisation. (ŠVANKMAJER 2006)

During the pandemic, I have become aware of an interesting phenomenon. When participating in online events, symposia, and discussions, I was very quickly left with a sense of unreality. The next day, it was as if the event never happened, the memory

was so weak. I began reflecting on this in more depth and in the light of my ongoing interest in embodiment, sensory perception, and place, I considered the effort one has to make in order to attend a **physical event versus an online one**. The getting ready, then making the journey, the anticipation, the actual arrival, the atmosphere of the place, the energy of engaging with others, the richness of all the conscious and unconscious multi-sensory impressions one gathers along the way leads to a complex emotional experience and such an event thus becomes situated, **embodied**. And in direct relation to this, it becomes ingrained in memory in much more depth. On a computer, seated in the same position that one sits in when working, breathing in the usual smell of one's familiar surroundings, the experience appears generic, mundane, two-dimensional. It was this reflection that has led me to reconsider, in my creative practice, the importance of embodied experience in terms of **producing meaning**. I began to think about how to create a more lasting and deeper emotional/aesthetic experience for the audience.

## On the digital and embodiment

Without physical touch, however, there is the threat of becoming soulless, of ex-carnation, in which the energies escape from the bodies, not only at the end of life, but already during one's lifetime, be it in individual moments or entire phases of life. (SCHMID 2019: 51)

Published in 2019, the book *Von der Kraft der Berührung* [On the Power of Physical Touch] by philosopher Wilhelm Schmid captures what many felt while in isolation during the pandemic. In it the author describes the importance of human touch for maintaining emotional stability and leading a rich, fulfilled life. If the sensory deprivation created by the pandemic is an exception, it is true that the way in which we use the senses has changed throughout history. In the age of digitalisation, digital media and their tendency for the augmentation of vision are taking away from our other sensory channels. This is the technologically savvy but alienated, lonely, and fragmented individual described by philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2021) when talking about contemporary society. Our experiences of reality are increasingly mediated and losing in (multi)sensory richness (HAN 2021). At risk are our embodied experience and our imagination, as Finnish architect and scholar Juhani Pallasmaa (2005: 12) warns when he observes that '[c]omputer imaging tends to flatten our magnificent, multi-sensory, simultaneous and synchronic capacities of imagining'. How to counterbalance this tendency and create a sense of centeredness, connectedness, and wholeness in one's being and to one's environment through art?

## On external movement and touch in IOL

At the intersection between performance, immersive event, and guided experience, central to *The Infra-Ordinary Lab* was the body of the audience member, its relationship to other bodies, such as the animals of the abattoir but also the buildings on site, and the porosity of boundaries. The walk brought together the freedom to wander of the modern *flâneur* with the curated multisensory experience offered in early museums, in which the visitors were invited to experience artefacts through all of their senses (CLASSEN 2012). In the early modern period, touch was seen as a counterpart and corrective of sight as it is only by lifting an object that its real weight can be experienced. Sculptures and artefacts from different time periods or cultures were said to be touched with the eyes and seen with the hands. This slowly evolved towards today's understanding that privileges sight. Through touch, a bridge is built between space and time. The body and close-range senses that cultural historian Constance Classen (2012) sees as omnipresent in Mediaeval life, were slowly eroded moving into the modern period until in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they became absent from informing aesthetic judgement: sight became the main aesthetic sense, followed by hearing. The pandemic, which forced us to abstain from touch in the public sphere and the increase in daily use of digital media, has produced a gap in our haptic experience. At the same time, we have become really sensitive to sensory stimulations. By counteracting the modernist dictum still ingrained in most of us, that an artwork should be seen and not touched, the IOL invited the participants to experience the world around them haptically and come into contact with different layers of time.

## Internal movement, movement from space to place

In order to develop this project, I decided to combine aspects of my ongoing artistic research, which is concerned with using multi-sensory prompts to communicate narrative, as well as working with a place, exploring it through some of the methods used by psychogeographers. Psychogeography (a term which describes the effect of a geographical location on the emotions and behaviour of individuals) enabled a more open-ended and **meditative engagement with the location**, which led to random discoveries and subjective encounters which also triggered personal memories and associations. In a way this way of working is close to the one exposed by Judith Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) in which she 'considers the utility of getting lost over finding [one's] way, [...] an ambulatory journey through the unplanned, the unexpected, the improvised, and the surprising' (HALBERSTAM 2011: 15–16). These chance encounters, together with more traditional research of the place's history, were integrated into the audio track and delivered to the participant in a fragmentary form.

The other form of research I employed was the 'sensory workshop' method, devised by myself. These workshops were held regularly on location and enabled a playful investigation of the area through multiple senses with a group of collaborators. It





**Fig. 5:** *Infra-Ordinary Lab*, blindfold exploration. Photo: Tereza Stehlíková.

involved blindfolded exercises in pairs with a particular **focus on touch and sound**. This was done in order to explore non-visual senses in a more focused way, without the domination of vision. Aspects of this research were later applied in the blindfolded experience, which was offered between two points on the map (as discussed in the introduction).

To experience IOL, you had to walk. The participants could control the pace of their experience, they could take breaks between different points on the map, and they could respond to invitations made in the audio track. As an example, here are some of the prompts that encouraged people to proactively engage with specific locations and their history, by directing their movement:

'So now turn slowly towards the main entrance to the market, with building 29 on your right and building 11 on your left). You are now facing south, where the main entrance to this area is. Your back is facing north. To your right west, to your left, east.' (stop 2)

At another moment they are asked to:

'Imagine your hand is a measuring tool – put your thumb on the chin and your index finger to the base of your nose to measure the distance.' (stop 7)



**Fig. 6:** Relating distance: active engagement with the environment.  
Photo: Karel Komorous.

The intention throughout is to keep participants proactive, anticipating, never just passively ‘consuming’.

## **Framing multi-sensory attention and cinematic approach in the age of attention economy**

The idea behind the whole project is partly influenced by the concept of the ‘infra-ordinary’, coined by the French author George Perec and discussed in his book *Species of Spaces* (2008). The concept was applied to exploring the infra-ordinary aspects of our everyday existence: directing the gaze away from the mainstream, the obvious, the sellable, or too monetisable, towards the wonder of the seemingly mundane, overlooked, habitual. As we know, attention is the most valuable commodity in our age of attention economy so to practice diverting it seems vital and even radical.

To achieve in bringing forth the infra-ordinary aspects of the Holešovická Tržnice, the performance combined cinematic devices with more participatory performance elements (these included a narration, visual and other framing devices, and the use of soundtrack to colour the emotional experience), while also allowing each of the participants to dictate the pace of their experience, to stop, pause, even interrupt the





**Fig. 7:** Stop 3: TUNE IN. Photo: Isabel Magdic.

experience by stopping the audiotrack. The narrative and the given map were both concrete and specific. They offered a chance to focus attention, through various ‘framing’ techniques, within which the audience could exercise their own agency. The participants have been given various spoken prompts: they have been asked to perform simple physical acts such as lifting an arm with the intention of connecting them with their own bodies as much as with their surroundings.

## On the Infra-Ordinary

George Perec’s text is not the only text focusing on the poetics of the everyday. In *In the Praise of the Shadows* (1933) the writer Jun’ichirō Tanizaki points to the aesthetics of everyday objects as giving stability to cultural identity. It is in terms of shadows and undefinedness opposed to light and clarity that he describes the differences between Eastern and Western aesthetics (TANIZAKI 1933). The ‘imperfect’ to his eyes acquires perfection as the patina of use accumulates on the objects (TANIZAKI 1933). He invites the reader to re-appreciate mundane objects. These are not simply objects but they embody a century-old knowledge of a culture, stratified through use, rethinking, and adaptation. Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) looks instead into the mundane corners of our childhood homes – those spaces that are generally not the

main interest of adults but that fascinate children. These minute details are engraved in our memories as well as our bodies and create an internal landscape against which all successive spaces will be compared. IOL allowed the audience, through touch and focused visualisation, to shift the attention to the details of a non-space, allowing it to become a place to which emotions and memories are attached. This detailed examination one only reserves for one's childhood home/spaces.

Here are some of the examples of prompts given to participants along their walk, as taken directly from the audio track. Incidentally, these instructions to the participants could also be read as a camera movement:

'Stand so that you are facing the wall. Behind the wall, the river Vltava flows. You might even be able to smell her? Hold your palm like a telescope to frame your view. Move it to your right, or west, and find a tiny Prague castle. It fits in the palm of your hand. If you follow a straight line, it is 3.5 km away. Move your telescope another 90 degrees, towards north. Can you see the tall chimney? This used to be the first Czech factory for making water metres.'

The audio track was thus effectively helping the audiences to frame their view (Fig. 8); in the same way a filmmaker/cinematographer would choose their shots for their audience and control the way each shot is followed by another, as well as its duration and the overall rhythm. While in the case of this project the participant had more agency than a cinema viewer, there was still a time-controlled element introduced through the audio-track.

At a specific point the participants were also offered various simple 'framing tools' with coloured filters or mirrors, to explore the mechanics of their vision, referencing the picturesque tradition discussed by Giuliana Bruno in her seminal book *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art Architecture and Film* (2007) as she describes it as precursor to cinema: 'Before filmic close up made it possible to approach the image and move into it literally, the picturesque enabled one to physically move into the picture and into picturing' (BRUNO 2007: 195). So before a lens was able to bring you a close up – you had to use your own body to bring the image close to you.

It can be argued that *The Infra-Ordinary Lab* project is something of a return to the pre-cinema tourism tradition, where it is the viewer's body that needs to generate the experience through motion which in turn generates emotion, a relationship between movement and feeling which Bruno explores in her *Atlas of Emotion*, when she draws interesting parallels between cinema and travel: 'the fascination for views and the physical hunger for space that led subject from vista to vista in an extended search for urban and spatial emotion' (BRUNO 2007: 172). Having now become fully accustomed to being transported by cinema (or video/computer games, etc.) at the click of a button and without much physical effort on our part, there appears to be a renewed desire for a more active and embodied participation of audiences (as mirrored by the growing trend in immersive and participatory theatre and experience economy as such), hence a return to the pre-cinematic modes



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**Fig. 8:** Framing view. Photo: Tereza Stehlíková.



**Fig. 9:** Stop 6: SEE. Photo: Isabel Magdic.

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of exploration. This is reflected in the comments which respond to the blindfolded section of the walk:

'It was great to have the variety of sensations, both the man-made plastic barrier tape, the wooden sign and the delicate flutter of the tree leaves and the robust stalks of the plants. So nice to have both worlds sharing focus.'

Beside being a promenade work in which the audience travels through the spaces of the Holešovická Tržnice, IOL invites the audience on an internal journey, in which the movement is done through 'travelling' attention, focusing on different elements of our embodied experience. Structured around three 'movements'/points of view, the *Lab* first guides the audience (1) to turn the attention towards their internal landscape of sensorial experiences. It then (2) feeds the inner eye of the mind, so our visualisation skills, with images and stories, followed by the audience (3) interacting again with the external world. These changes in focus relate to our embodied experience of reality and lead the audience to interact with the world around them from a new perspective: here not only a fresh eye is cast on the details of everyday life, but they become aware that the whole body is involved in the act of perceiving the world. It is an intensification of the everyday, in which the everyday acquires a poetic undertone. The audience is anchored by a bird-eye-view that positions them inside the market and the market inside the city of Prague together with a superman eye, able to pass through the concrete of the street and see the chambers and refuges beneath the streets under it.

Touching parts of the space around the Holešovická Tržnice market, contributed to rendering this space intimate to the participants. Intimate in such a way as we generally know from childhood, with the focus on details and emotional intensities as described by Gaston Bachelard (1994). For the international guests who came to the market for PQ 2023, this would have resulted in developing a particular attachment to the space without any previous association to it. For the people who knew the space already, it would have opened an additional layer of 'associations', making the connection even deeper. The experience offered by the IOL moved the perception of space in modern cities as 'a conglomeration of strangers' (CLASSEN 2012: 178) to a more communal and intimate space. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1975) would define this as *place* juxtaposing it to the notion of *space*: 'Space is abstract. It lacks content; it is broad, open, and empty, inviting the imagination to fill it with substance and illusion; it is possibly a beckoning future. Place, by contrast, is the past and the present, stability, and achievement' (TUAN 1975: 165). Tuan suggests that a place can be experienced at different scales; homes, for example, are 'experienced uncritically through the passive modes of smell, taste, and touch' (TUAN 1975: 155). IOL actively stimulated these 'passive' senses through blindfolded walks (Fig. 10 and 11).

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Fig. 10: Blindfolded walk. Photo: Karel Komorous.

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**Fig. 11:** Blindfolded walk. Photo: Karel Komorous.



**Fig. 12:** Stop 5: TOUCH. Photo: Karel Komorous.

Here an example from the audio track, where attention is directed towards touch specifically:

‘You may want to touch one of the metal circles in the wall, to which animals were tied. If you hook your finger on it, you can try and pull.’ (stop 5)

And here is feedback in response:

‘I was deeply moved feeling the metal rings and hearing the stories behind them. I appreciate the thought that MY touch, and that of the other visitors can add a new layer over the fear and confinement of the animals.’ (feedback from a participant)

[What I will take away with me is]: ‘Engaging all my senses, not just sight to feel connected to the space I inhabit. Appreciating the history of space and of the grounds I walk every day instead of taking them for granted.’ (feedback from a participant)

Touch allowed the participants to build a bridge between the past and the present. As Constance Classen discusses in her ‘Touch in Museum’ essay: ‘Touch by contrast annihilates distance and physically unites the toucher and the touched’ (CLASSEN 2005: 277). This powerful effect of touch, in opposition to vision which requires distance, can have a strong emotional impact, because it allows for a greater intimacy between the toucher and the touched (itself an interchangeable category).





**Fig. 13:** Blindfolded walk. Photo: Ivan Ryapov.



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**Fig. 14:** Blindfolded walk. Photo: Ivan Ryapov.

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## On the politics of the body and senses

Early modern military drills were central to the creation of the modern body, a disciplined body that after years of precise exercise was perfectly prepared for the mechanisation and optimisation required for moving and working inside a factory (CLASSEN 2012: 169). The virtues attributed to this standardised and disciplined body are the ones that are also central in capitalist society. Classen associate '[t]he drills' emphasis on regularity, efficiency, and diligence stimulated and paralleled a wider social obsession with these traits' (CLASSEN 2012: 169). The modern body is a body disciplined to 'duty, self-restraint, order, punctuality and obedience' (CLASSEN 2012: 171). This body is subservient to the capitalist system in which under the influence of Freud's psychoanalysis the 'hands-off approach to life, hence, would come to signify not only an appropriately disciplined body, but also a civilised and mature self' (CLASSEN 2012: 182). The standardised modern body is one that does not touch with the hands but only with the eyes, an attitude which in turn trickled to museums and exhibition spaces as well as aesthetic judgement in the arts. Under this light, the centrality that IOL puts on hearing and touch goes against the grain of this disciplined body habituated to operating in a capitalist environment. The politics of the senses involved in the 'performance' challenge the status quo of general theatre performances.

Juhani Pallasmaa, Finnish scholar and architect, reminds us: 'the idea of sensory training is nowadays connected solely with artistic education proper, but the refinement of sensory literacy and sensory thinking has an irreplaceable value in all areas of human activity' (PALLASMAA 2009: 134).

It was the intention of the IOL to include some of the sensory training methods, as explored during sensory workshops on site, into the participatory experience. By doing this the participants were thus initiated into aspects of the creative process, which normally remain within the realm of the creative team.

The general feedback that has been given was reaffirming of the intention, as the following examples, gathered from various participants, show:

'Being blindly guided through the space that I had walked through countless times in the days prior allowed me to truly process it in another way. I was able to focus on sound, smell, and touch and connect with the space rather than just use it as a path to get me from one place to the next.'

and

'The blindfolded walk guided by one of your artists was incredible. The lack of vision, our most prominent of our senses, heightened my other senses and deepened my feeling of presence with my body and in the space. I also had an interior journey of trust with my guide and myself, eventually resulting in my relaxation and letting go of the fear that I might hit something or touch something dangerous.'

[ yorick ]



Fig. 15: Blindfolded walk. Photo: Karel Komorous.





Fig. 16: Blindfolded walk. Photo: Karel Komorous.

## On the politics of the senses: blindfolding

From a neuro-scientific point of view, blindfolding people, depriving them from their main sense organ, allows for the other sensory inputs to be heightened (EAGLEMAN 2020). The other two major channels from which information from the external world is taken in, are touch and hearing. And that is exactly what the participants reported. As the brain is constantly changing from the inputs it receives, the so-called neuroplasticity of the brain, taking a major sensory channel out allows for more intense perception and focus on the other senses. The change is temporary as when the blindfold is removed, the effect quickly disappears. Still, it is long enough to have the audience members consider another way of being immersed in the world. Many related to the feeling of being enveloped by the sensations, especially sounds, that seemed to rush by them when not seeing. They were immersed in what was happening around them. It is interesting to note the difference in experience: a person rushing to the supermarket would simply have seen a blindfolded person guided by a performer touching walls or grids, whereas the person wearing the blinds would have experienced an opening onto another 'world' of sounds, wind touching the skin, smells, and haptically interesting surfaces (Fig. 16); all inputs and a level of perception generally overridden by vision. An underworld that is just below the surface of the everyday, easily accessible and at the same time easily overlooked. In a way, this draws a parallel to the unseen underworld existing in the chambers below the market that quietly goes unnoticed to the shoppers on the surface. Once the blindfolds were taken away and the eyes readjusted to the light, the audience would experience the full spectrum of their sight, not only focused vision but also peripheral vision. Pallasmaa argues that '[t]he loss of focus can liberate the eye from its historical patriarchal domination' (PALLASMAA 2005: 13): they were seeing in a diffuse manner not concerned with optimised vision, or focused vision.

## Embodiment in meaning making: situating language

The language of the audio instructions which is triggered by the participant in each of the 'stations' marked on the printed map they carry, is situated in a real, physical place, it works with the space, or, one could argue, is site specific. It is the binding medium that helps to situate the participant in their environment. This intention starts from the very beginning of the walk, when the 'voice' helps the participant to orient themselves within the physical space:

'So now turn slowly towards the main entrance to the market, with building 29 on your right and building 11 on your left). You are now facing south, where the main entrance to this area is.

Your back is facing north. To your right west, to your left, east.' (stop 2)



The voice guides the participants through the visible physical space, so locating them in the geographical location of Holešovická Tržnice but also through the invisible, through the stratification of the events that occur in the space. For instance, it describes how the animals were kept and draws attention to the function of the different buildings at a time when the area functioned as an abattoir. It also describes underground bunkers beneath one of the streets, in order to invite participants to imagine these invisible realities. By providing a narrative thread, the voice situates the participants in space and time, and invites them to consider their sense of here and now in relation to the complex history of the location.

One could go so far as to say that the voice is an invisible performer, whose situatedness is suspended in space and time. It is an invisible Virgil guiding unknowing participants through an uncharted territory.

## On the Relationship between audience and performer

The relationship between audience and performer is very intimate. On the one hand, there is the speaking voice, the narrator, which leads one through different *tableaux* of sensation, images, stories, and exercises. One can decide partly to abide by the exercises or skip some of the stories, which might have been a bit harsh as related to the use of the space as an abattoir. On the other hand, the guided blind walk is free to experience if the audience member wants to. The intention is to not pressure the participants into unwanted situations. The performance thus ‘touches’ the audience in different ways. There are two types of performing instances: there is a narrating voice and there are performers in flesh and blood. If the relation with the narrating voice is easy to determine – the voice is directly addressing the audience members with ‘you’, less clear is for the instances involving direct touch.

For Mieke Bal (1999) the deixis of persona is connected to the notion of narrative voice in three types of narration: first, second, or third-person narrators. For example, a situation in which the audience is not directly involved in the action and the fourth wall is maintained, is comparable to a narrative in the third person. The action is observed at a distance, as in Marius Petipa’s *Sleeping Beauty* (1890). In ‘first-person’ works, on the other hand, the audience has to make choices, as in Punchdrunk’s *The Drowned Man* (2013). In Punchdrunk’s work, the viewers and the performers occupy the same space – a building with several floors – and viewers are free to follow (or not) different characters throughout the rooms. They can enjoy closeness and, in some cases, even being touched by the performers. The proximity and the choices given to the audience result in greater involvement. The work addresses the audience directly, even though without direct interaction with performers. Rather, the dancers are performing soliloquies. A ‘second-person’ perspective, on the other hand, is exemplified in those works where the performance demands the audience’s direct interaction, such as Xavier Le Roy’s *Production* (2010), and a clear distinction between performance and the viewers is maintained. At the beginning and at the end of Le



**Fig. 17:** Stop 8: Fruit and vegetable market hall. Photo: Isabel Magdic.

Roy's work, the performers enter into dialogue with the audience, asking questions. The simple act of asking creates an 'I-you' relation in IOL, which is absent in Punchdrunk's show. The case of the IOL would thus be considered as a second person narration moving at times to an omniscient third person, when the voice is retelling past events for example. There was something subversive about the walk, both in the fact that the audience was asked to engage with touch, a sense generally not addressed in performances, and in the fact that the narrator offered a quiet commentary about consumerism in a capitalist society by asking the participants to embody the opposite of consumerism: nothing was optimised, but instead structured so the audience could drift into the unknown.

## Sense of imagination in the age of the virtual

The idea was not only to invite participants to focus on their various channels of perception, but to also use their sense of imagination proactively, to conjure up the invisible realities of the place: things hidden through material barriers, or temporal dislocation, or those that have not yet taken shape. They were invited to consider imagination as the most powerful tool for augmenting reality.

According to Juhani Pallasmaa (2009: 134): 'there is a dramatic difference between the passive looking at pictures, on the one hand, and images created by one's imagi-

nation, on the other. The effortless images of entertainment imagine on our behalf'. Unlike in a film, where each scene is carefully constructed and visually presented, in this project the participants were invited to conjure up whole scenes, through their own inner eye – their imagination. They were, for example, invited to envisage hidden spaces, which were only described verbally. The invitation to use imagination as a method of **augmenting reality** was used partly as a playful provocation, to challenge participants and make them more proactive.

The feedback has been positive:

'[I enjoyed] the tension and incongruity between the everyday normalcy of the tiny street and the story of what lies underground.' (feedback from a participant)

[And what I might be able to take away for everyday life is]: 'The imagination of what a space used to be, what it is currently, and what it could be in the future.' (feedback from a participant).

In a world in which we want to augment reality through the use of technology, we are unaware of the most powerful tool at our disposal: our imagination. Neuroscience has established that there is no difference between mental and real images in the areas activated in the brain: visualisations are experienced as authentically as images 'perceived by our own eye' (PALLASMAA 2009: 131–132). Similarly, a memory or an imagination moves us as a proper experience would: we can have an embodied experience of them. Suddenly, we are transported somewhere else in time and space by the memory elicited from a smell or a sound. Today with digital media the person is transported in a virtual new visual dimension with reality slowly disintegrating. For philosopher Byung-Chul Han in *Undinge* (2021) tangible objects are replaced by the intangibility of digital information, or 'Undinge' (not-objects). The world is losing the tangible, replaced by information. He argues that we have replaced the Earth with Google Earth and the clouds in the sky with iClouds (HAN 2021: 7); smartphones are at once 'infomat' and 'informant' (HAN 2012: 11), providing information and tracking the users. As people, we dissolve into a cloud of data, unaware that our embodied experience is recorded by more sensors than we are able to think of.

What Pallasmaa (2005: 17) calls the 'hegemony of vision' is intrinsic to the way digital media are designed. He connects this to the 'the development of Western ego-consciousness and the gradually increasing separation of the self and the world' concluding that 'vision separates us from the world whereas the other senses unite us with it' (PALLASMAA 2005: 25). Smartphones in particular augment vision through touch. With it, we are always one touch away from the virtual space. The body and its experience in the here-and-now are forgotten, carelessly deposited on a chair while the finger and the eyes are scrolling down a screen. Within VR, the person is transported in a virtual new visual dimension. The eyes tricked via synesthesia into a simplified experience of the (virtual) world around us with which we interact via controllers. But why look for the virtual outside ourselves?



If we expand on Classen's idea, we could say that touch is finally regaining part of the centrality it had but it is not a touch directed to the real world. It is a touch towards what is immaterial, potential, virtual. It is a touch with which we merge with the screen, it becomes an extension of our persona, granting access to a space in which our identity and our image can be edited and curated as we want. As Han (2021: 16) differentiates, it is not the touch of the hand but that of a finger: the hand creates whereas the finger chooses. It transforms us into monads, cut away from and at the same time inserted in more than one reality via screen and AirPods, as we speak to people who are not here while we are not present to what is happening around us if not to take a picture. Our gaze is constantly mediated and our bodies dormant.

Towards the end of the performance, the participants were deliberately made to take a walk through a large digital retail store, which displayed a variety of technological devices including screens, smartphones, and games. But rather than walking through in the customary shopping mode, the participants were invited to consider the dark history of the building and contrast this with the shiny, 'brave new world' of its current manifestation.

Voice:

'Please step into this brave new world, and take a slow contemplative walk through this vision of the future, you visitor from the visceral past.'

And later:

'Now digital bodies live here. Look at them!

They cannot catch disease from bacteria, they do not age, they are sterile, flat.

They are not meat eaters, not vegetarians, they do not need to eat at all.

This is the beauty of digitisation. Beauty of pure audio-vision. Beauty in HD.'

Here are comments from a participant, sharing their experience of this penultimate station:

'When I entered the tech shop, I felt like I was transported to the future. I appreciated the ambivalent lens of this section. This Technological landscape was neither a negative betrayal of nature and presence but it wasn't a positive progression either. It was simply a stage of development that demanded the same amount of presence in the space and body that was being explored previously.'



Fig. 18: Stop 9: TIME TRAVEL, Alza digital store. Photo: Tereza Stehlíková.

### Interconnection between inside and outside/ subjective and concrete

One of the key concepts explored in the IOL was the drawing of the parallel between the participants' bodies, the animal bodies, and the architectural spaces. The idea of things existing in relation to each other became a vital element within the performance: hence the idea of scale (micro and macro), visual perspective, human and non-human points of view, subjective and objective states, internal and external realities, and past, present, and future temporalities, superimposed on top of each other.

It was important for me to explore the boundary between inside and outside, i.e., a mental space of each participant (consisting of emotions, memories, and imaginings) and the physical, external space (i.e., the architecture, materiality of buildings, the organisation of streets). Having these two realities interweaved offered interesting potential for creating a deeper emotional connection, by allowing each participant to relate the external environment to their internal and visceral worlds, and vice versa, to map their emotional and visceral realities onto the topography of the place. This intention was introduced explicitly by the map given to each participant at the start of the journey, where each stop was labelled with a body related verb, each of which

also forms an invitation to the participants: i.e., orient, tune in, dive in, touch, see, imagine, immerse, time travel, breathe. Additionally, the relationship between the participants' own bodies and the abattoir buildings, themselves dedicated to specific animal parts, was articulated in the audio track, for instance:

'Can you feel your own skin? Tiny hairs? The skin marks the boundary of your own body. It is the threshold between inside and outside. This unusual building behind you used to be a hide storage: here the skins of animals were hung to dry.' (stop 3)

This relating of architecture and the body was also created in contrasting scales, for instance, by moving from the mention of blood factory, which existed in the abattoir grounds, by zooming in the substance of blood itself:

'Blood is both a tissue and a fluid. It is a tissue because it is a collection of similar specialized cells that serve particular functions. These cells are suspended in a liquid matrix (plasma), which makes the blood a fluid.'

The feedback to this particular aspect of the project reaffirms the intention:

'This experience was incredibly calming and felt very meditative. However, while most meditations work to turn you from the outside world and to your inner self, this piece was able to connect the inner self with the outside world and bring both of those energies together.' (from a participant).

## Continuum of experiences

Donna Haraway in her *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) was one of the first who thematised the fact that we should not consider reality in binary oppositional terms but rather on a continuum in which humans, animals, and plants are located together with technology. The idea was then expanded and explored further as one aspect in the Anthropocene concept which highlights how humans are unaware of their interdependency with their natural context. Halberstam in her *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) goes one step further by arguing that it is in the in-between spaces, between 'cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other' (HALBERSTAM 2011: 1) that an alternative way of living is expressed. Her approach based on Stuart Hall looks at the moments of what is generally considered failure by society, when one is lost as opportunities for real innovation. By 'investing in counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity' (HALBERSTAM 2011: 11) but also intuition, we are able to free ourselves from a hegemonic capitalism. Her argument about queer bodies can be taken one step further to include all bodies thus 'alternative forms of embodiment and desire are central to the struggle against corporate domination' (HALBERSTAM 2011: 29).

IOL emphasised the continuum of experiences between humans and animals through history by setting the audience to emphasise through embodiment and visualisation with a few not so cruel experiences of the animals in the abattoir. IOL's



conscious non-paranthocentric perspective on history, (paranthocentricity being a fallacy that considers one's point in history as neutral), set the past, present, and future experiences in Holešovická Tržnice as equal in validity.

## Conclusions

The aim of this text is at once to be a documentation of the performance and to offer an insight on the theoretical reflections that informed the work. In Halberstam's spirit we offer you a map of thoughts and detours, as we did to the participants, to get lost and emerge intuitively on the other side having lost one's way (HALBERSTAM 2011: 6) and gained (hopefully) new ideas to be ordered at leisure.

Working on the senses, the outcome is the lively embodied experience. The ephemeral nature of performance work makes it challenging to capture and communicate the vivid experience of the participants once the performance is over. The hope is that our words will stimulate the imagination of the reader and thus partly transmit this experience. The fragmented structure offers the reader a space for their own reflections.

IOL invites participants on a walk that is subversive in the sense that it does not follow the obvious routes in the market but also invites them to observe and create their own visceral landscape. The subversion comes from the way the audience's sensorium and imagination are engaged. Through the stimulation of hearing and touch, but also other proximity senses, IOL allows the audience to take notice of their 'disciplined body', a body in which we are all supposed to feel the same. It offers a break from the push for production and optimisation that is sold to us as freedom of choice. Following dance researcher Alexandra Kolb's ideas, about covertly political messages in contemporary performance, we are reminded that immersive works are not enacting 'more dissent nor more democracy than any proscenium stage performance' *per se* (KOLB 2012: 43). Rather it is the way in which this format is used that can be political, because as the socio-political context in which these post-modern forms have been developed has shifted, it is the way in which this format is used that makes a work political.

The performance offers a place for reflection on remaining embodied in a society whose tendency is towards fostering disconnection from physical reality and its sensual experience. Reality is more complex than the digitalised version offered by technology. These sensed experiences cannot disappear into a depersonalised cloud of data but are intimate personal events. At the same time, we are consciously or unconsciously constantly monitored, our data are measured with more or less useful intention. We are not our data even if, *mutatis mutandis* expanding on Paul Watzlawick's maxim of communication, we cannot not produce data. We are also constantly influenced by our context (which instead is not accounted for). Data are neither positive nor negative. They will not be able to tell us how and why we successfully connected to the '*genius loci*', how we reframed our perception of everyday

reality and our locating ourselves in it. They are not able to tell us how to put ourselves in a playful childlike immediacy of experience. This only our bodies and our imagination can.

In the age of the attention economy, where our attention is manipulated and monetised, it seems vital that performance and theatre should also be able to offer a space where people have a chance to digress from the mainstream narrative, to explore their attention, imagination, and emotion freely, actively, and through their whole bodies. Could thus the infra-ordinary be considered radical in that it offers a kind wilderness, which is beneath the radar of our consumer society? What potential might lie there and how may this be explored further?

It is crucial not to leave our body behind as we gallop towards the shiny digital future, keen to forget our messy organic reality. Because it is precisely our body which produces meaning. As one of the participants told us after their IOL experience:

'I found it a bit gruesome. "Human" history IS gruesome, and I expect that is done intentionally in order to have the audience feel something before they start to physically feel things. As a society we are out of practice of feeling anything. But I do wonder if that is necessary. It was certainly a welcome relief to walk through the market filled with so much prana near the end. It made me a bit sad to end with the digital store. But that is our current reality; one we all need to face. Thanks for a very memorable experience!!'

## **IOL collaborative team:**

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Map design: Tony Jurnr

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