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On Art, Activism and the Politics of Maritime Space

SEEFRAUENPARADE 2.0 – ALL SHEFARERS* ON DECK!

Dagmar Rauwald 2023

SEEFRAUENPARADE 2.0 understands artistic practice as a form of intervention into social space. With a parade of ships, boats and barges travelling through the Port of Hamburg, the project makes women* in maritime contexts visible, audible and tangible. Yet the parade is more than a feminist statement. It investigates what happens when artistic practice and activism enter into a public space that is historically shaped by trade, colonialism, labour, mobility and predominantly male power structures.

The harbour is not simply a geographical location. It is an infrastructure of economic and political relations and, at the same time, a cultural imaginary. Hamburg's identity has been profoundly shaped by its port, while the histories that made this prosperity possible remain unevenly represented. Maritime space has traditionally been associated with masculine mobility, exploration, conquest and economic power. Women have always participated in these histories, yet their presence and labour have frequently remained less visible.

SEEFRAUENPARADE 2.0 therefore asks: Who has the right to move through the harbour? Who is entitled to occupy maritime space? Who is heard, and whose presence remains peripheral?

The project responds to these questions through a deliberately temporary and performative intervention. Rather than claiming permanent ownership of the harbour, the parade temporarily alters its choreography. Boats become artistic and political actors; movement becomes a form of speech; the harbour itself becomes a stage. The participants do not simply represent an alternative history—they physically produce another spatial relationship.

In this sense, the project follows Michel de Certeau's understanding of walking as a practice through which people appropriate and transform urban space.¹ The harbour is not only an infrastructure to be used; it becomes a space that can be collectively reimagined. The parade creates a temporary geography in which established boundaries between water and land, centre and periphery, spectator and participant become unstable.

This instability is central to the relationship between art and activism. Activism seeks to intervene in social and political realities; art can create forms of perception through which these realities become newly experienceable. The artistic dimension of the

project therefore does not serve merely to illustrate political demands. Performances, sound, radio, model ships, installations and collective movement create situations in which political questions are embodied rather than simply communicated.

The project deliberately works with the paradox of visibility. To make women* visible is necessary, but visibility alone does not guarantee structural change. The parade therefore asks what kind of visibility is being produced, for whom, and under whose conditions. A spectacular event can attract attention while simultaneously remaining temporary. The question becomes how a temporary artistic gesture can generate longer-lasting shifts in perception.

Judith Butler's concept of assembly is particularly relevant here. Public gathering is itself a political act: bodies appearing together in a space can challenge the assumption that this space belongs exclusively to established institutions or dominant groups.² The collective presence of the Seefrauen* therefore becomes a form of spatial claim—not ownership, but participation.

The use of water intensifies this question. Unlike fixed architectural space, water is unstable, mobile and difficult to possess. It connects rather than simply separates places. The harbour can therefore be understood as a threshold between different territories, histories and forms of mobility. The parade activates this threshold and turns movement across water into a political and artistic gesture.

At the same time, the project consciously addresses Hamburg's colonial history. The port was and remains embedded in global systems of extraction, trade and unequal mobility. Feminist intervention therefore cannot be reduced to increasing the representation of women within existing structures. It also requires questioning the structures themselves: economic networks, colonial continuities, labour relations and concepts of ownership that have shaped maritime space.

The fictional fleet of Her*storical Utopia extends this strategy. The model ships imagine a maritime history that never existed: a fleet of feminist* vessels crossing a miniature harbour. The models function simultaneously as artworks, speculative objects and historical counter-narratives. By inventing a missing history, the project exposes the constructed nature of the history that is usually presented as given.

This strategy can be understood through what Donna Haraway calls “speculative fabulation”: the capacity to imagine other forms of relation and other possible worlds.³ Fiction does not necessarily turn away from reality. It can reveal the exclusions through which reality has been historically produced.

The radio component Mayday, Mayday, Mayday expands the intervention from the visual to the acoustic. The harbour becomes a temporary communication network in which voices travel between ships, land and listeners. Sound crosses physical boundaries and creates connections that cannot be contained by architecture. The radio transmission

therefore becomes another form of spatial occupation: the harbour is not only seen differently but heard differently.

The project also raises a critical question about the role of the artist. Is the artist an activist, an organiser, a mediator, a researcher, or a producer of images and situations? SEEFRAUENPARADE 2.0 deliberately refuses to establish a clear separation. Artistic and activist practices overlap without becoming identical. Their productive tension lies precisely in their different modes of operation: activism demands action and political positioning, while art can preserve ambiguity, contradiction and open-endedness.

The parade consequently does not aim to provide a definitive feminist interpretation of maritime history. Instead, it creates a temporary situation in which dominant narratives can be interrupted and alternative ones rehearsed. It transforms the harbour from a seemingly stable economic infrastructure into a contested cultural space.

The most important artistic gesture may therefore be the act of repositioning. Ships change their course; bodies enter spaces in which they have historically been underrepresented; voices cross the water; fictional vessels interrupt established maritime imagery. The harbour remains physically the same, but its meaning shifts.

SEEFRAUENPARADE 2.0 thus understands art as a practice of spatial and social reconfiguration. Its activism does not consist solely in demanding change; it temporarily performs another possibility. It creates a situation in which a different maritime order can be imagined, embodied and collectively experienced.

The parade asks us not only to look at the harbour differently, but to recognise that public space is continuously produced through participation. If the harbour is a place of movement, then its social and political structures must also remain capable of movement.

*All shefarers on deck!** becomes therefore both a call to action and an artistic proposition: to enter the water, to occupy the space differently, to listen to other voices, and to imagine maritime futures beyond inherited hierarchies.

Literature

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