

Blank Noise.

Looking for a new vocabulary through the practice of public space.
 A conversation with Sara Alberani and Jasmeen Patheja
 edited by Serena Olcuire

Jasmeen Patheja¹ is a feminist artist and activist, whose work is strongly focused on ending violence against women, girls and all persons. She is the founder of Blank Noise, a growing community of persons also known as Action Theyroes/Sheroess/Heroes, taking agency toward the same fight. Exploring her works, it is possible to note the key role of urban space in her practices: the relationship between female bodies, violence and public space is at the center of her actions. Despite (or because of) the awareness of the role that crossing public space plays in our lives, in our perception of safety and in our freedom to experience the urban environment, Jasmeen decides to use those same spaces to make visible what is not always seen or to make audible what is not always heard. In this sense, she calls herself “an artist in public service”.

We met her thanks to the invitation by The Orchestras of Transformation², a project curated by Sara Alberani, Valerio Del Baglivo, Matteo Lucchetti and Judith Wielander, that combines contemporary artistic imagination with new action strategies for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the 2030 Agenda. As curator of this issue, we wanted to do a formal interview with her, to build a common reflection on the relationship

1 <http://www.blanknoise.org/>.

2 *The Orchestras of Transformation* is a project curated by Sara Alberani, Valerio Del Baglivo (Locales) Matteo Lucchetti, Judith Wielander (Visible). The themes of gender-based violence, regenerative actions for the climate crisis and underwater life, and the overcoming of social inequalities are at the center of this edition for the city of Rome.

Initiated on the occasion of the 2020 Rome Charter launch, and commissioned by Azienda Speciale Palaexpo, the project invites three international artistic and curatorial perspectives from Cooking Sections, Jasmeen Patheja and Johanne Affricot (GRIOT) to rethink artistic methods of intervention in the public sphere to implement paths of change and promote alternative imaginaries. Also due to the current pandemic situation, the team of The Orchestras, in dialogue with the figures involved, has developed a multiform method of artistic presentation which includes establishing collaborations with local and international actors, developing social-media campaigns and podcast episodes with a powerful mediatic impact and aimed at a wider audience. See also: <https://www.palazzoesposizione.it/articolo/the-orchestras-of-transformation> www.localesproject.org; <https://www.visibleproject.org/blog/>

between artistic practices, public spaces, and feminist demands: unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic got in the way, making it impossible for these issues' deadline. We have thus decided to rework the preliminary conversation we had on 9th February 2021 with Jasmeen and Sara, in anticipation of further developments in this trans-local relationship.

Sara Alberani: Today we are here – and I'm so thrilled about this – after many months in dialogue with Jasmeen about her practices and their possible translation into the Roman context.

We are in the middle of a curatorial process that we built as the curators of the Orchestras of Transformation, in order to understand how to re-elaborate a commission on the right to cultural participation and the achievement of Agenda 2030, an occasion for bringing the practices of international artists, engaged in urgencies related to their territories and communities, on a translocal participated dimension.

Together with Jasmeen, we are looking for methodologies for doing it, and the meeting with you Serena, and the many activists, researchers, and local communities involved in the topic of gender-based violence, is a fundamental step.

With Serena we met on many occasions in Rome, always in large groups, crossing those difficult areas of Rome, often inaccessible, that together no longer frightens us. I've been looking for this connection between the two of you, glimpsing the common features of your research: the performative and practical approach to public space and the work with the communities. This conversation is also an attempt to build a relationship between the academic and artistic world, on the basis of friendship and trust. We are now meeting on this ground, after one year and a half of forced isolation, and it is important to create a safe space – maybe using an art project – for a deep exchange, and to do that based on common learning and solidarity. From here on, we begin to know each other better...

Jasmeen Patheja: I grew up in Kolkata, and when I moved here in Bangalore I was nineteen years old. I was very excited to be on my own in the city, but I realized that fear and threat became visible to me: suddenly I started walking very differently, with my elbows out. I noticed that my female friends walked mostly in groups, and there was no vocabulary for all of this. All I knew is that these experiences were happening, people around me had just

normalized fear, and while I was excited to be wandering in the city on my own, I noticed my friends were making choices that were invisible to them: they went out in groups, or with their boyfriends... there were some safety mechanisms which I did not adopt. And I realized that whenever I was sharing these experiences, there was no vocabulary and there were also understatement such as "don't make a big deal out of it, you can't change it". In India or in South Asia street sexual harassment was identified as 'eve teasing' back then, and it doesn't do it justice, because it takes away from the actual event... So, there were lots of experiences that had no name. At the same time, I was also interested in art practices that were built by people and that could heal, that could confront issues. I am glad I had the opportunity to study at new art college, where they were focusing also on communication for social change; I was also introduced to feminist art practice, community arts and the role of artists in consciousness raising. I proposed I wanted to start a conversation on this issue, but I didn't know what to call it... I was graduating and I proposed it as a thesis project: at that time we were about one hundred students in the college, and about sixty girls came into this room and we made a mind map with all the public spaces. There were mostly negative associations for everyone with the whole public space, and this brought up the proposal: "if you're experiencing these negative emotions, why aren't we talking about it?". And that is really when Blank Noise began.

Three months later I graduated, but between that question and the three months that followed, there were workshops, listening circles... I was learning to facilitate. We recognized we all experienced fear, that we all had no name for that, we all had experienced something we had not spoken about, and that we were speaking about it for the first time. And that fear was... in our body, that we were *taught to* fear.

From the very beginning, Blank Noise's vision was to be a movement but an "I didn't know how to call it" one. We always approached this with the lens of "there's no outsider to this issue": there's always a witness, there is always a person who experienced it, there is always a person who caused it. So, how do we work with *that* fact, that there is no audience, but everybody has to take ownership of this issue? I graduated, but still with this large question of "How can this become everybody's, how can people take collective responsibility for this issue?".

So this question really informed Blank Noise, and I see it as an ongoing public conversation. I did not come from an academic background of sociology or social work degree, but I learned with the critique and with the community over the years. In the beginning, my approach was “I’ve experienced this, I want to address this”. But over time these questions around my class, my background, my identity, who causes street harassment, these questions lead to this idea of “what are the politics of fear, and the politics of the narratives of fear?”.

I really feel Blank Noise in two halves: one part which is speaking about street harassment (and now talking about all forms of violence, connected through victim blame) and the other part which is designing these actions to change or shift, or affect a current patriarchal climate.

For example, “I Never Ask For It” Mission builds testimonials of clothing to end victim blame. When asked the question “Do you remember what you wore when you experienced sexual violence, threat or intimidation?”, most women, girls and non binary persons can remember. We are building testimonials of clothing. The garment is memory, witness and voice to an experience of sexual violence. - Building the #INeverAskForIt Mission rests on the listening part of Blank Noise, where people can speak, and listen, and heal, and there are methodologies being designed to do so. The other half of Blank Noise can be experienced through an action such as “Meet to sleep” where we are embodying what “I Never Ask For It” says... Meet To Sleep is claiming the right to be defenceless, and shifting the given state of the body, from the body in fear, to the defenceless body.

Serena Olcuire: I was really intrigued by your idea of sleeping in a public space. With our collectives, we worked on this mechanism of self-discipline that we, as women, operate on ourselves: that mechanism by which if an area or a neighborhood is considered dangerous, and the best is not to go there. Which is absolutely unfair, and wrong not only because we are limiting ourselves and our behavior, our desire to be in the city and be *flaneuse*, to walk around, but also because we are depriving the space itself of our presence, which is the only way we can make it a safer place. If there are other women’s bodies, space is safer: I think this is the only way to enhance safety without resorting to securitarian policies, without recurring to the police or other armed people in

the streets that should take charge of our safety. Safety is presence first and foremost for me.

When I saw those pictures of many women drifting to sleep in parks, I thought that it may be perceived quite odd in Italy, or even it may be considered inconvenient as a behaviour. In this sense it's interesting to question ourselves on what is considered indecent – sleeping in public in Italy is not indecent but it is considered inconvenient, and most of all is inconvenient for a woman, maybe because it exposes her to possible violence. The power of the sight of your bodies on the lawn is such that it makes us question our collective perception of public space, but at the same time it shows a clear, strong action of asking for trust: I can be in the public space because it's my right, and because I trust people, I don't have to constantly feel fear of others. Those 'others' that in Italy are often racialized: fear is a powerful tool that can be instrumentalized and we constantly see how in Italy it is often manipulated for racist policies: the dangerous 'other' is not Italian but is someone with darker skin, poorer and menacing you in public space. And instead, the real danger is in our homes: statistics say that most of gender-based violence is happening in our houses, by our relatives or partners, not in the public space. And this is very efficient to control public space and relegate our bodies in the private.



"Meet To Sleep" 2018, Delhi



"Meet To Sleep". Action Shero Satya

JP: I would say that for the first decade of our work we focused only on fear and public spaces, on our mobility, and began to understand the role of victim blame in justifying sexual violence. The identity of Action Sheroes, Theyroes, Heroes emerged in the first decade³. They are individuals taking agency to confront gender-based violence, to confront those fears. As you say the more women occupy public spaces, the more those will become and feel safe and welcoming. That also turns into the questions "which women will occupy public spaces? Which women's narratives are being heard and understood? Whose public space is it, in its intersections of class, privilege and plural identities" Who is the city being designed for? Whose experiences are being validated? Who is there for purposeful leisure? Who is there for work? Can we look at public space as shared? How do we instill belonging instead of fear?"

A constant back and forth of *good discomfort*, is what I think Blank Noise rests on, on welcoming critiques and going into turbulent spaces because that iterative process gives an idea shape and meaning. With this an intervention is designed.

Since 2004 the idea of shame and blame it's been part of the

³ An Action Sheroe, Theyroe or Heroe is any individual or group acting to eradicate gender based and sexual violence.«Blank Noise ignites the idea that every person has the ability and potential to eradicate sexual and gender based violence. Action Sheroes/Theyroes/Heroes take agency to tackle the issue», <http://www.blanknoise.org/about/herstory>.

practice. In the beginning, when I used to ask people to speak and I wanted to listen and to understand women's experiences of street harassment, I would get different kinds of reactions. The first reaction was "I never experienced it", another reaction was "How can you ask me a question like this, I'm not that type of a woman", a third would be "I've experienced it, I want to talk to you"... Only later I realized that the idea of "good girls don't experience violence, and if you experienced violence you've asked for it" was so deeply ingrained, this insight led to creating #INeverAskForIt.

With "I Never Ask For It", at the beginning it was really about recognizing that clothes don't matter, that it's *all* women that experience violence... But again, after 2012, the question was: "what is the relationship between spaces of violence, what it is that connects domestic with public space and the workplace, and the campus, and the internet, and how this violence is being justified across these spaces?"

So that's how our work has moved from bringing attention only to fear and violence in public spaces to bringing attention to victim-blaming, and that attitude that has long justified violence across spaces.

But coming back to the question "which women will occupy public spaces?", that can also turn in "which women are we talking for?", I would like to know more about your experience with street sex workers in Rome.



"I Never Ask For It" in Bangalore, 2017-2018

SO: The issue of “who are we talking for?” is huge, and sex workers are a very ‘slippery’ category, that challenges both what we consider the right to the public space and feminisms themselves. In Italy feminism is very split on this topic: we have entire generations of feminists considering sex work the worst form of commodification of the female body and do not consider it conceivable for sex workers to be feminists, while younger generations are fortunately much more open from this point of view. In NUDM feminist movement, there is also a group for sex workers’ rights that is called “Ombre Rosse” (Red Shadows). It is not rare for sex worker who are also activists to have had the opportunity to reach a certain level of education; but this is not always the same for women that make street sex work, which are often coming from more complicated life-paths; migrant sex workers are much more difficult to meet and to intersect with feminist movements.

During my PhD research, I had lots of conversations with street sex workers, which was very important to me because it was really difficult to conceive such a conversation for my academic interlocutors. It was difficult to think that a woman in the street can be just – a woman, I mean, someone that may have something to say to you. I have the impression that the general thought is always “I do not have any means to speak with someone who is so far from me from so many points of view”, but not always this prevents you from speaking for others.

I mostly worked with transgender sex workers coming from Colombia. With them, it has been very interesting to question my feminist position, because we had (and still have) very different point of view on what a woman is, and or how a woman ‘should’ behave, and it was very interesting for me because I was starting from the belief that anyone that considers herself as a woman *is* a woman, so she could speak about her experience as a woman. But yes, it was interesting to see how we considered in totally different ways appropriate behaviors and gender expectations. I couldn’t see it as a limit in terms of feminist movement, I think the people I knew in those groups are living and building their own form of feminism, which is challenging my own one. It’s a very difficult ground, but it is very interesting, undoubtedly.

Something else about this: with Pauline Curnier Jardin, a French artist resident in the French Academy in Rome we made a work with a group of Colombian sex workers friends. Pauline’s idea

was to redistribute the production fund of her art piece (provided by the French Academy), to the sex workers, which were among the categories impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, because obviously, they couldn't work in the public space, and they couldn't ask for legal welfare measures, because they couldn't demonstrate to have a job that was compromised by the pandemic measures. So she decided to give these funds to them, in exchange for the production of an art piece. We asked this group of sex workers to produce artworks, to produce drawings with different techniques. During these sessions of collective drawing we had a very interesting glimpse also on what we consider as sexy, for example, or of what we consider a sexual intercourse, how we were differently seeing the male body (and the female body, obviously). It was a moment of deep exchange among us: art practices are very helpful in exploring that *good discomfort* you were naming before.

You were saying that you "had no vocabulary", and I totally agree that we don't have a common vocabulary for our experiences. Sometimes maybe it is not possible: for example with sex workers, we had such a different background and experience of the everyday reality that it was very difficult to find a common vocabulary, to give the same name to the same experiences, or to recognize the same experience under different names. But I think that working on these difficulties is the most challenging thing that we can do now because it is on that kind of work that we can elaborate on common and uncommon things.

You were talking about this necessity to give a name to our experiences and this is one of my favorite feminist practices: to give a name, for me, is also to give a shape to something. As an urban planner, everything for me passes through the dimension of space, so I was wondering: how can we translate this practice of 'giving a name' into spatial terms?

JP: Around to the 'naming' question, this idea of the vocabulary being missing, when we had these listening circles, so many people hesitate to share it, they said we hadn't any idea of what violence was, and therefore violence is something that 'extreme' that we can only speak about it and that "my experience is not as bad as hers". So there's judgment, some socially made invisible measurement that is constantly making us invalidate our experiences. In working on "I Never Ask For It" I have

learned about the “unnamed, unspoken, but not forgotten” instances. We emphasize, there’s no measuring practice. If you haven’t forgotten, if it’s part of your body and it’s part of your memory, you’re welcome to bring it in, if you feel ready to. We started this conversation in 2004, “Do you remember what you were wearing when you experienced violence”? The next year we introduced the Museum of Street Weapons of Defence⁴, which was to draw attention to how fear was normalised for women saying that it’s normal to carry a knife or a safety pin, key chain or so. Each of these are methodologies to name, identify and articulate an unnamed, sometimes unwelcomed memory. We are building methods for people to speak about violence, about street harassment, about sexual violence in public spaces, because there is still so much shame in calling it “sexual violence”...

SA: I find your question very important, Serena, about how we translate the practice of ‘giving a name’ into the public space. I think this could be interesting to discover together. What you are saying is melting everything in something that could be very useful, a way to design our geography and our map of the city, instead of forbidden places or secured places, with the name that we give them.

I would like, here, to reconnect with Jasmeen’s work: she starts her practice through listening groups, where the question of language is crucial, because it comes from experiences. So there is a daily, a very accessible aspect of her work that translates into practices and in the names they assume. These practices are situated in the public space, and from here they embody a new vocabulary.

For example, “Meet to Sleep”: we did it together Serena, without knowing how to call it, then the “Right to be Defenceless”, and “I Never Ask for It”, on the sense of blame and shame while experiencing sexual violence, it’s also “Unapologetic Walking”, regaining a public space that we no longer crossed, it’s self-defining *Action Sheroes, Heroes, Theyroes* and carrying this strength in anti-patriarchal and anti-heroic way, establishing synergies and alliances, it is “Reporting to Remember”, that’s what we are doing now: exchanging experiences and knowledge that build something else for a different future. Here, we have

⁴ <http://www.blanknoise.org/museum-of-street-weapons-of-defense>.

translated the practice of 'giving a name' into spatial, social, and time terms.

Another very big issue is about men: how can we reach them? There is an enormous lack between our practices and how they can reach the outside, and also, who is participating? I believe that practices can help and inform the language, as they are accessible and horizontal; mobilization manages to greatly shift the point of view with respect to a debate that often becomes ideological, instrumental, and above all it still involves largely women to take care of the whole issue, but as victims.



"I Never Ask For It" in Bangalore, 2017-2018

SO: Practices in public space are surely a powerful tool for social (and spatial) change. Jasmeen, since you started this project (so, since 2003) it has been a long time, and I was wondering if, in your opinion, something changed in the general frame of gender-based violence in India. For example, in Italy something is (very slowly) starting to change in the way journalists are talking about gender-based violence: for instance, we're now talking of *femminicidi*, when a woman is killed by a man for gender-based reasons. There are some small changes in the narratives...

JP: Well, after 10 years of Blank Noise, and also after the murder and gang rape of Jyoti Singh, which was more globally known as

the ‘Delhi gang rape’⁵ when this young girl on a bus was gang-raped by five men and this led to national mobilizations, lots of new groups emerged in response to addressing violence against women in public spaces in India. This means that the issue was no longer reduced to ‘eve teasing’.

But in terms of how the discourse has changed... I think a lot has changed, but it is also a spectrum: there is still that patriarchal belief that women asked for it, that women need to be put in place, that women need to be taught a lesson; and there are still murders in the name of family honour. But something has shifted, perhaps is that there is more solidarity in being able to say “I Never Ask For It”...

The political climate is different now. The practice responds to this political climate, and the context for I Never Ask For It will evolve in response to the current climate, in an effort to shift it. The current government erases the notion of India as a plural diverse country, instead by devising ways to make it a ‘hindu rashtra’. It is steeped in patriarchy and violence justified to punish women, or put women in place, for speaking, for dissent, for expression. What we are up against, and what we are located in socially/politically has shifted too. This is the context the work originates in.

But I do feel like it keeps coming back to how we build work and practise that can be around listening, that can build empathy, that can heal, that can enable compassion, that can enable understanding and imagining plurality and plural feminisms. So I think it keeps coming back to that...

The practice at Blank Noise is built on the labour of many Action Sheroes/Heroes/Theyroes (citizens/ persons) and also through feminist solidarities with organisations that build #MeetToSleep with the communities they work in, in rural and urban India. It rests on feminist networks and organising.

Why loiter, led by Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, have written a book by the same name now ten years ago. It brings attention to women’s right to loiter and to public space. We have been in conversation since our early years (before the book). Blank Noise kind of originated at the same time. In Pakistan, a group called *Girls At Dhabas*⁶ was formed.

5 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Delhi_gang_rape_and_murder.

6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Girls_at_Dhabas.

The group was led by young women, hanging out at tea shops on the street at these very public street sites called *dhabas*. They occupied public spaces through this act of building friendships and making new realities. There has been an uprising of many initiatives in the country which assert women's right to be out, in countries across the world since 2003.

But then again we must question whose relationship with the city is being visibilised and invisibilized which women's right to be out? And that is also what we are responding to. At Blank Noise we are conscious of the limitations and possibility of media, communication and community; everyday citizens find us by stumbling upon the press, the internet. This is limited by the English speaking press, so that already becomes exclusive, so how do we dissolve that is by acting and working in collaborative ways with local organizations to do "Meet to sleep" and "I Never Ask For It"? As an artist, facilitator, I am proposing an idea for collective action. This collectivising rests on medium, media, and movement building approaches.

SA: Yes, absolutely: actions can cross many boundaries. So, speaking of impact, let's go back to the question we started with: how can we translate artistic practices outside their local contexts, which become methodologies for communities who are addressing the same urgency, informing the field of action, and making it much more impactful towards the future?

Jasmeen works primarily through listening groups, and during this year marked by physical distance, forced isolation and the impossibility of working with her physically in Rome, we built in the form of a podcast series, a structure which underlines the importance of listening, to favor dialogue, interventions, debate in Rome with people who are active here, and are being informed about what the artist has been doing for years in India. A series of episodes, starting from names of Jasmeen's practices, fills a missing vocabulary on gender violence and above all, proposes alternatives that can be adopted by anyone.

So, even curating becomes a practice: it has taken long months dialoguing with Jasmeen and mapping the Roman network that could embrace this format and make it its own; from here we can proceed to many other cities, the potential scalability is wide.

It was also important to translate a commission that could have been resolved in the economy of an 'event' into something that

remains for the artist, and that adds to her methodologies, providing an infrastructure for future productions. And so we go back to the origin, audio can be transformed into public audiences, potentially worldwide listening groups, and become that shared ground for the impact we are looking for.

Sara Alberani is an art historian and independent curator based in Rome. Graduated in Art History at Sapienza University of Rome, she attended ULB in Brussels and CuratorLab in Stockholm. She expresses her curatorial practice in socially engaged art and in artistic projects in relation to communities and public space, including currently the project for documenta15 together with the community of asylum seekers, refugees and activists of Trampoline House, Copenhagen. She is also involved in long-term projects such as LOCALES, curatorial platform promoting site-specific and situated art programs in Rome; The Orchestras of Transformation, curating artistic practices under Agenda 2030, promoted by Palazzo delle Esposizioni, UN Sdg, UCLG network; KENE, permanent photographic laboratory by Mohamed Keita, Bamako, Rome; Artists at Risk: a European network of Safe Havens (Helsinki, Berlin, Barcelona, Rome, Tunis). alberanisara@gmail.com

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Jasmeen Patheja is an artist in public service. Patheja builds ideas for public action committed to ending violence against women, girls and all persons. She is the founder, facilitator of Blank Noise, a growing community of Action Heroines, Heroines, Theyroes; citizens and persons, taking agency to end sexual and gender based violence. Patheja's practice has led her to working towards the right to imagine in a climate that forces bodies to fire fight, and the right to be defenceless and vulnerable in responding to victim blame. In 2019, Patheja received the prestigious Visible Award; awarded for socially engaged art practice. She was recently awarded the Jane Lombard Fellowship by the Vera List Center For Art and Politics at The New School, New York. BBC listed her as one of the 12 artists changing the world in 2019. In 2015, she received the International Award For Public Art, towards the project "Talk To Me" (Blank Noise).