Choreographies of
Everyday Friction

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Everyday, citizens perform, on public surfaces, synchronised routines of elaborate moves. Through the simple act of walking in the city, we log into a system of rules and constraints, codes that regulate the circulation of citizens within urban space. Such regulations display a certain algorithmic quality; they discretise human behaviour. Sometimes they are rigorous and mathematical, other times loose and under-defined; they can be quantitative and invisible, while embodied and performed. Regulations are nothing but symbols, conventions, but they persuade human beings to act. They are sets of instructions, conditional statements, ultimately incorporating power; a structural force that plays into everyday life.

The act of assembling in public space is both an individual and a group activity, involving figures, interplay and synchronisation. The resulting patterns and choreographies extend beyond exceptional events, to the most mundane of activities. It is not uncommon in the media, for example, to spot demonstrators keeping their march to one line, standing on the sidewalk, in Washington DC. Any reading or picnic gathering over twenty persons in one of New York City’s parks requires a special event permit. In Sweden, you might need to apply for a permit to dance in public. In Cairo one is allowed to spontaneously discuss public matters only if there are fewer than ten people.\[1\] Some regulations surely sound sensible, some bizarre, many are contested and strongly conflictual. Choreographies of law in space extend beyond the spectacular event to the everyday. The high visibility of the exceptional event, of the battleground, suddenly makes one aware of the infra-ordinary in its invisibility.

Fig. 1: Test in Novi Trg, Ljubljana (BIO 50, 2014)
Friction Atlas — a project initiated by the authors in Ljubljana in 2014, and expanded in Berlin, Athens, and Melbourne — aims to make regulations — always implicitly present in any public space — explicit and legible through graphical devices. Through the engagement of the public, we attempt to make the dynamics of authority become not only visually but also physically discernible.

In each city, we drew full-scale diagrams onto the pavement of public spaces to illustrate the rules that control their uses in overlay with rules of other cities, such as Genoa, Cairo, Washington, Stockholm, Sydney. We sampled from different cities in order to show not specific conflicts, but the pervasivity of minor and daily frictions. We deliberately designed and arranged situations — collectively organising an environment and a play of events — that then resulted in actions, dérives, crossings of the city.\textsuperscript{[2]} We invited the public to assemble, to participate in staged choreographies, to discuss, and reread the urban space, highlighting some of its hidden aspects.

Such regulations of space are rooted into the
modern project of making the world — and ultimately its population — legible. Institutions and organisations filter the data they need to know, to then abstract, flatten and spread it out, in ways that makes it readable. Then the world is reformed in the image of that abstraction.\[3\]

From the citadel to the boulevard, urban history includes a wide array of theories and practices, whose aims include making crowds and individuals legible — addressable, shapeable — from above. Nevertheless, the regulation of the city, and questions of space — such as the control of public space — extend to less visible structures and relations as a variety of abstractions, codes, and law.\[4\]

It is in this context, that the quality of legibility — so central in modern practices — can be flipped, to allow for multiple gazes. Kevin Lynch uses it to signify the perceptual clarity of an urban environment, or “the ease with which its parts can be recognised by its inhabitants”.\[5\] When systems expose their structure and activity, they are legible too. The experience of the urban environment grants citizens a degree of agency when the resulting mental maps can be operationalised, to enable reprogramming, hacking, and deconstructing. Can such a quality be extended to a diversity of urban systems? The way the urban is regulated still lacks tangible representation; law is often too murky, while ungraspable, to be discussed. Designed interventions can help in bringing to the foreground what is otherwise lost to view, neglected, or taken for granted as someone else’s problem — too thin, shadowy, banal, and invisible.

Understanding law as a human artefact, Friction Atlas highlights some of the regulations invisibly traced upon any urban surface, as in a playing field. As a critical intervention, it reflects on the double entendre of legibility: through graphical devices and performative practices it reshapes local laws into fully visible agents, providing possible models for opening up to new forms of civic and aesthetic engagement with hidden or abstract layers of the city.
In code, objects — even people — are abstracted. Persons and things are only known through their predicates, their quantified qualities. Citizens, as individuals or groups, are measured in their amount, the noise they make, the age they have, the distance they keep. The contrasting materiality of the street, however, seems here to offer the aptest context for opening a discussion about the acts of assembly.\[6\] We turned the physical context into an open playing field — a loose game board — and posed an invitation to play. By keeping the experience ambiguous and valuing the uncertainty of the status of the performance, both informed and accidental participants would contribute to the same choreography.

Embodying rules, enacting laws on the use of public space in the actual public domain, raises questions: Is this a game? Are we playing? Which
role am I playing? In the street, the boundary between being in and out of the game is blurred, and so are the social boundaries between who is playing and who is not. The diagrams represent pedestrians, as well as protesters and policemen, but the player identities and the ordinary ones always somehow overlap. This sort of game, at the same time playful, ironic and highly serious, has no goal — only rules, which without context, interpretation and the active participation of the visitors would exist only as static code, as ready-made, found predicates.

Friction Atlas was initiated by Paolo Patelli and Giuditta Vendrame of design and research collaborative La Jetée for BIO 50, the 24th Biennial of Design in Ljubljana (18.9—7.12.2014). Further developed within the Adhocracy Athens programme (29.4—4.7.2015), it is currently on show at the RMIT Gallery and is part of the Performing Mobilities festival (17.9—31.10.2015) in Melbourne, Australia.

REFERENCES

[1] Legal references for each of the mentioned cases can be found in Fig.7—11


