

Research Article

Lynn Kuhfuss, Anna Menslin*

Intervening “City Horses”: Soft Performative Gestures of Protest in Public Space

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Abstract: This contribution explores *City Horses*, a *site-adaptive* performance by the Scandinavian duo Byström Källblad, as a *soft* performative intervention in public space. Performed in various cities, female-read performers embody “wild” horses to engage with equestrian monuments that symbolize male power and military authority. Through gestures such as neighing, trotting, and lying down, the performers inscribe a movement-text into the cityscape that subtly challenges dominating narratives. Drawing on feminist theory and theories of public space and performativity, we analyse how choreographic acts create temporary spaces of resistance for marginalized bodies. Following Chantal Mouffe’s concept of artistico-activist dissensus, we understand the performance as a *soft* form of protest that shifts spatial meaning without direct confrontation or occupation. From a dance-theoretical feminist perspective, we argue that movement can become a resistant practice that contributes to shaping a feminist city – through care, presence, and disruption.

Keywords: *City Horses*, intervention, Choreographing Dissensus, protest, *soft*

1 Introduction

Striding, trotting, galloping, a herd of female-read performers moves through the city as horses (Byström Källblad 2025 [2017]). Passing by historical sites, they shake their manes, neigh, snort, stare, and drop to the ground to rest. *City Horses* is a *site-adaptive* performative intervention by the Scandinavian duo Byström Källblad, which has been curated in European cities since 2017, such as Oslo, Berlin, Skopje and in Brisbane, Australia. The performers explore the hegemonic and territorial structures of places dominated by equestrian statues which are reserved for rulers and military leaders. To this day, equestrian statues unfold their power in their symbolic presence in the cityscape, inscribing themselves as a political movement text in public space – a space of, by, and for men.¹

This contribution evolves from having met as dance scholars in the baroque city of Salzburg: A place where the horse is figuratively captured in bronze and stone on fountains and pedestals, as well as lively inscribed in the everyday movement of the city, pulling carriages and contributing to the soundscape and the smell of the city. Both of us looking through a dance theoretical prism, we merge our research emphasis on movement analysis and performative practice in public space, coming together in co-authorship as a feminist

¹ The multiple interventions of *City Horses* are well documented and accessible on Byström Källblad’s website: <https://cityhorses.se/> (27.09.2025).

* **Corresponding author: Anna Menslin**, Music and Dance Studies, Paris Lodron Universität Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria, e-mail: annarebecca.menslin@plus.ac.at

Lynn Kuhfuss: Dance Studies, Hochschule für Musik und Tanz Köln, Cologne, Germany

methodology (cf. Barad, 2007; El Kotni et al., 2020). Our perspective and perception are fundamentally shaped by moving as white abled cis-women, researching in and on “western” European dances and public spaces.²

City Horses makes equestrian monuments visible as symbols of patriarchal power, frozen in time and public space, juxtaposing them through moving bodies as horses. With what we propose to call “soft performative gestures of protest in public space” – such as neighing, trotting, and lying down – they pursue a performative “artístico-activist strategy” that adds another layer of movement-text in public space (Mouffe, 2008, p. 12); movement-text in this context being the dominating positioning of horse and rider and the everyday movement of humans in the city. As political philosopher Chantal Mouffe’s agonistic understanding of artistic interventions proposes, “critical art is art that foment dissensus that makes visible that the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate” (Mouffe, 2008, p. 12). Linking *City Horses* to Leslie Kern’s encouragement to take space and activistically co-create a feminist city, we offer to read this performance as a radical act of softness that holds the potential to (temporarily) reconstitute public space in performative interventions. Softness, how we understand and use it in this contribution, allows an anomalous movement – horse movement – to take place in an urban environment.³

With a theoretical framework, drawing from feminist theory, theories on public space and performativity we use a methodological set of movement, performance and iconographical analysis to approach questions as: How are patriarchal patterns of movement inscribed in equestrian monuments and their emplacement in the city? What could be the impact of the choreographic response by the performers of *City Horses*? And how does this intervene as a form of *soft* feminist protest and as a coeval designing of public space?

2 Performative Intervention as Feminist Protest

Moving through the city, the female-read body enters into a situational confrontation and interaction with the existing spatial and social context:

Just as patriarchy is enshrined in the urban environment, white supremacy is also the ground upon which we walk. The extent to which anyone can simply ‘be’ in urban space tells us a lot about who has power, who feels the right to the city as a natural entitlement, and who will always be considered as out of place. (Kern, 2021, p. 114)

In *City Horses*, Byström and Källbad use the city to address hegemonic structures inscribed in bronze and stone as equestrian monuments, since “the city is the place to be heard”, and has served as such for political movements of the past two centuries (Kern, 2021, p. 118). In her chapter “City of Protest” Leslie Kern highlights the importance of activism as a form of imagining and potentially shaping public space (Kern, 2021, p. 115ff.).

By understanding interventions as performative artístico-activist, Chantal Mouffe emphasizes the political role of art and proposes a shift in strategy: from avant-garde rupture to agonistic intervention. Instead of aiming for total negation or utopian escape, artists should intervene within existing social spaces, unsettling dominant narratives and disrupting the illusion of consensus (cf. Mouffes, 2008, p. 7ff.). The deep and irreconcilable conflicts at the heart of society – what she calls *antagonisms* – should not be suppressed but transformed into *agonism*: a form of democratic contestation where adversaries engage in open struggle without seeking to eliminate one another (cf. Mouffes, 2008, p. 10). By creating sites of dissensus, however modest or ephemeral, art can help imagine, rehearse, and enact alternative social relations. Based on this, *soft* gestures of protest in public space become powerful activist acts, not by offering solutions, but by making visible what the dominant order represses, through interventions.

² The terms “white,” “abled,” and “cis-gender” refer to social categories that shape visibility, privilege, and perception in public space and performance. These intersecting identities influence how gestures are felt and received and how they engage with public space (Hedva, 2016).

³ To read further about softness, refer to the study by Oakley (2020) and Sousa (2025).

To further understand where the term *intervention* comes from, it is insightful to mention that the concept of intervention was initially used in the fields of politics and international law, where it describes the active intervention of a state or an institution in an existing process or conflict (von Borries et al., 2012, pp. 90–91). In the 1960s and 1970s, social and avant-garde art movements such as the Situationist International⁴ coined the term and used it to critically reflect on social, political and spatial conditions in order to create a potential “counter-public” (von Borries et al., 2012, pp. 126–127). This refers in particular to interventions with an intersectional feminist claim, which are dedicated to related social and spatial issues. A counter-public can emerge in interventions on many levels in order to develop alternative communication spaces and discourses outside the dominant media and official political institutions (Mouffe, 2008, p. 10). With the diversity of feminist perspectives, it is important to bear in mind that feminist struggles look different depending on the social, cultural, and geopolitical context and to recognize the theoretical and cultural context in which an intervention is embedded.⁵

Situating *City Horses* in the realm of intervention, as a feminist intervention, it establishes a direct link to the significance and impact of the definition proposed by Friedrich von Borries in the *Glossar der Interventionen* (“glossary of interventions”): (Queer-)feminist interventions in male-dominated structures and spaces aim to “not so much attempt to break up and disrupt these, but rather add their own formats to them, thereby changing the dominant “division of the sensual” (Rancière, 2006).” (von Borries et al., 2012, p. 177) Further, *City Horses* align with the designation of the “site-adaptive”, rather than the more commonly used term of the “site-specific” (Koplowitz, 2013). According to choreographer and multimedia artist Stephan Koplowitz, site-specific work is created in direct response to the physical, historical, and social characteristics of a particular site and cannot be transferred elsewhere, whereas *site-adaptive* work is designed with the flexibility to be modified in response to different locations, maintaining its core structure while engaging with each new site’s context (Koplowitz, 2013). *City Horses* is not choreographed for a particular equestrian monument situated in a specific place; it is conceptualized to *take place* in various cities, moving through the city centre and passing equestrian monuments. It is therefore juxtaposing the petrified anti-democratic figures with the female performer’s living force, moving as “wild” horses in public space, offering a movement text that is flexible and *soft* in its movement quality.

Linking these thoughts to the choreographic sphere reveals the (un)conscious practice of producing space. In her publication *Stadt. Szenen* (“City. Sceneries”) dance and sociology scholar Gabriele Klein connects movement in public space to the concept of mapping, not as a principle of representation but a performative practice (Klein, 2005, p. 23):

Choreography as performance emerged through the specific dance concepts that, based on everyday movements and everyday experiences, processed these aesthetically. The reflection of everyday body languages with the means of choreography inevitably leads to other places, places of the everyday, which allow both a research and a mapping of everyday physicality and movement. (Klein, 2005, p. 25)

Klein hereby references the psychogeographical methods of the Situationist International, especially the practice of *dérive* of Guy Debord, exploring and mapping the urban landscape by wandering through the city (Klein, 2005, p. 22). In the psychogeographical practice of the *dérive*, individuals drift through the urban landscape, seeking to question habitual movement through subtle attractions in the emotional and social landscapes, moving intentionally, not goal-driven (Klein, 2005, p. 22). While this concept can evoke aesthetic responses, meaning the sensual receptions of the cityscape, the flâneur is an aesthetic stroller, detached but aimlessly observing the urban landscape. It needs to be critically situated as drifting through the city as a flâneur continues to be an excluding practice: Not everybody can explore by foot, and not everybody can

⁴ The Situationist International was an avant-garde collective of artists, theorists, and political activists founded in 1957. It emerged from earlier movements like Lettrism and focused on critiquing consumer culture, urbanism, and the spectacle of modern life.

⁵ For further examples of feminist performative interventions (site specific and adaptive), see the works *Quadrille* (1975) by Rose English, *Nexus* (1995–2021) by Lucy Orta, *Silver Boom* (2021) by Anna Anderegg and groups such as Pussy Riot, La Barbe and Guerilla Girls (*One Billion Rising*).

detach themselves from the urban and social landscapes the same way. As Leslie Kern states, this issue: “The flaneur was always imagined as a man, not to mention one who is white and abled bodied.” (Kern, 2021, p. 24).

The performers of *City Horses* touch on the conceptual strategy of *dérive*, by exploring the psychogeography: measuring, traversing, and exploring the space, producing spaces that have the potential to overcome hegemonic and territorial inscriptions of equestrian monuments. They do this by embodying and recontextualizing the city as “wild” horses, adding a layer to the movement text of the monuments, and therefore the cityscape. Hereby, they contrast the movement of the flaneur, not engaging in passive observation but in a participatory engagement with the city, interweaving the “individuals’ awareness and presence in the space in the here and now combined and negotiated with an awareness of the past” (Hunter, 2015, p. 98).

3 Equestrian Monuments – Who Writes/Rides the City?

“In our cities, on bronze horses, proud kings quietly stare above our heads. Their history and visual male dominance daily manifested and passed on to the next generation. Where are the women and their stories?” (Byström Källblad, 2025 [2017]).

City Horses site-adaptability requires only one condition of a place: that equestrian monuments characterize the urban landscape, the geographical site that situates and manifests a social or historical position. Equestrian monuments are built to remember an exemplary person or event. An anti-democratic figure, commanders such as kings and monarchs are depicted sitting on a horse, a contrast to hunting portraits, in which the horse is accompanied by the rider, or depictions of horse tamers, in which the person leads the horse by the reins and keeps it in check (Huneke, 2008, p. 23). They are not indexical signs to their sites, as they do not always refer to a specific place but rather constitute a place themselves due to their fixed physical presence and unfold their effect *in situ*.

These static aforementioned sign complexes are mostly situated on squares in front of rulers’ government buildings, town halls, city gates, or places where they once marched in the flesh for a reception or a parade on horseback.

The origins of equestrian monuments can be traced to classical antiquity, particularly within the Roman Empire. Monumental bronze sculptures, most notably the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurel (c. 175 CE), served both as instruments of imperial glorification and as visual assertions of political power of military symbolism (Huneke, 2008, p. 26). During the Middle Ages in Europe, this artistic tradition largely declined, supplanted by ecclesiastical iconography and sacred architectural forms. It was not until the Renaissance that equestrian portraiture underwent a significant revival. Florentine sculptors such as Donatello and Verrocchio reimagined the horse-and-rider motif through heightened realism, thereby portraying princely figures as earthly “heroes” (Prochno-Schinkel, 2024, p. 10). In the twentieth century, equestrian monuments were frequently instrumentalized to serve nationalist and authoritarian ideologies (Wienold, 2001, p. 5). Fascist Italy under Mussolini, for example, commissioned colossal statues of Roman emperors to fabricate a sense of historical continuity with imperial grandeur (Prochno-Schinkel, 2024, p. 116). In Eastern Europe, Communist regimes adapted the equestrian form to depict figures such as Lenin and Marx. Debates surrounding colonial history and racialized representation have prompted the (in)official removal or reevaluation of numerous monuments in the twenty-first century (Prochno-Schinkel, 2024, p. 145).

An equestrian monument is a so-called sign symbol (Wienold, 2001, p. 12). Its effectiveness does not result from a recurring regularity or an inherent quality, but rather from the singularity of the depicted ruler figure within its social and historical contexts. As a monument, it manifests the symbolic presence of rule and lends it a perpetual significance through its staging, appealing to society and creating a symbolic connection between the honoured person and the recipients in public space. This statuary self-portrayal can thus be read as a complex of signs (cf. Wienold, 2001, p. 13): How is the horse’s body positioned – its hooves, tail, and mane? How is the rider seated, and what is their posture? How are the reins held, and how is the horse being directed? What is the rider wearing, and are they holding weapons or a sceptre? Where is their gaze directed?

Political statements can be read not only from the design of the equestrian monument itself, but also from the chosen symbols, the depiction of the person, and placement in public space: Does it suggest an unobstructed ride? How large are the rider and the horse in relation to each other? What is the relationship to the spatial surroundings? These elements can be used deliberately to convey certain ideological or historical narratives and to reflect on or question social values.

The marginalization of female equestrian figures in the heroic ideal form of masculinity of the equestrian statues is due to the fact that women were traditionally excluded from (military) leadership positions. The first human-sized equestrian statue in a public space was dedicated to Queen Victoria in Glasgow, which was unveiled in 1906. The British monarch is deliberately staged here according to the conventions of male depictions of rulers: In full regal regalia, with crown, sceptre and orb, she adopts the type of the “imperial horseman” (Prochno-Schinkel, 2024, p. 95), an act charged as symbolic, through which female sovereignty is legitimized merely by recourse to male-coded pictorial forms (Prochno-Schinkel, 2024, p. 95).

However, this exception confirms the rule: Queen Victoria does not appear as a woman, but as the personified embodiment of the Empire, whereby her gender identity is adapted in favour of her political function and its representation in the city. Queen Victoria is captured in a controlled, upright posture, with both horse and rider exuding calm authority rather than dynamic motion. Queen Victoria is depicted seated firmly and regally, guiding the horse with minimal movement, suggesting command through presence rather than force. This stillness and composure reflect a distinctly feminine representation of power, rooted in dignity, restraint, and sovereign control. Here, the equestrian motif serves less to visualize female subjectivity than to reinforce monarchical claims to power (Huneke, 2008, p. 23).

Equestrian statues, therefore, not only exclude women, but in the extremely rare cases of female representation, this requires a re-signification to established, male-connoted symbols of power. The visual culture of equestrian monuments in public space thus remains a mirror of historically evolved gender hierarchies.

4 Choreographing Dissensus – Performance Analysis of *City Horses*

As sculptural condensations of hegemonic narratives, equestrian monuments not only stage male heroized figures, but also a specific understanding of movement: control, dominance, triumph over space and body. The elaborate balance that an equestrian statue technically requires – as few points of support as possible, maximum dynamic of the pose – transforms movement into a frozen gesture of power. These inanimate sculptures direct movement and gaze and rhythmize bodies in urban space that are thus not only moved, but also disciplined by the symbolic presence of the monuments.

City Horses as an artistico-activist intervention offers a dynamic approach to this coded rigidity: Twenty female-read performers enter the urban space as “wild” horses and use movement practices that lead the domesticated horse – and metaphorically the female body – to free, “wild” horses. Trotting, galloping, jumping, sniffing, neighing, stumbling: Their movements defy the linear, goal-oriented logic of urban locomotion. Instead, they create spatial spheres that meander, interweave, rest, and interrupt. They merge everyday movements with embodied gestures that resonate with forms of movement beyond human-centred functionality. While equestrian statues aestheticize hyper-controlled movement, the performers show movement as a process, as resistance to petrified fixation. In particular, the rhythmic changes between different types of walking temporarily open up spaces for alternative experiences of moving in the city. Striding is characterized by strong, expansive steps; trotting is organized by faster, rhythmically springy steps that are coordinated in a group dynamic but not mechanically synchronized. Galloping breaks up the structure: Unmediated bursts of energy, sudden changes of direction, and brief moments of sprinting destabilize the urban logic of linear movement. The performers repeatedly pause, turn their attention to their surroundings, let their gaze wander or fixate on imaginary points – creating an attitude of open, undirected perception.

Their movements are not mimetic in the sense that they imitate horses exactly; rather, they interweave everyday movements of human bodies and of horses. Instead of reproducing a binary distinction between

“human” and “animal,” the performers interweave qualities of movement that are reminiscent of bodily openness, spontaneity, and responsiveness – abilities that are inherent in all living bodies. Following the perspectives of New Materialism and post-humanist theory (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2008; Ruhsam, 2023), physicality is not understood here as an exclusively human category, but as a relational network of movement impulses, affects, and materiality. The performance *City Horses* makes this shared corporeality visible and breaks up the standardized movement regimes of urban space: The familiar image of the orderly gait is interrupted by moments of trotting, bristling, snorting, and resting, creating an embodied reminder of movement possibilities beyond the functional and purposeful.

Central moments of *City Horses* are the collective or singular lying down on the floor and the powerful standing up again. Going into a “downward dog” position, the performers, embodying horses, first lower their forearms to the ground in a controlled movement, bringing the chest closer to the floor. Then the hindquarters gently sink as the knees fold, and finally, the head drops slowly and heavily to the ground. This gesture of limb-by-limb lying down and standing up again not only interrupts the visual continuity of movement, but also fundamentally changes spatial relationships: A body lying down in public is a break with normative movement codes. A resting body in the urban environment resists the logics of productivity and efficiency, particularly in how it challenges normative expectations of productivity and public behaviour, reclaiming presence and vulnerability as forms of political agency. Other striking qualities of movement include intense snorting, neighing and head shaking, mane tossing, gentle rubbing of the bodies together in moments of contact, fine listening and peering, represented by precise head movements, sudden changes of direction, and group rearrangements. A constant processuality is embodied, a practice of becoming and discarding that consciously eludes the monumental fixation of the equestrian statues.

The performers appear in costumes whose simple, monochrome outfits create a visual continuity with the idea of the horse’s body without directly imitating it. The outfits, composed of everyday clothing, draw on different coat colours – brown, grey, black – which allows for singular differentiation within the herd, but at the same time creates an image of collectiveness. Also significant for their costumes are the manes of hair that are left loose.

Sound plays an integral part in this performative intervention. It is primarily created by the performers’ bodies themselves: Snorting, neighing, the rhythmic stamping of the feet, and chomping at the bit on asphalt or cobblestones. This auditory moment expands the performance situation beyond the purely visual and allows the bodies to resonate with the urban materiality. In addition, pauses and silences are deliberately used to pick up the urban soundscape (street noise, footsteps, conversations, and sirens) and weave it into the action, creating a multi-layered soundscape in which performative and city-specific sounds overlap.

In *City Horses*, the audience is a constitutive part of the performance. The intervention unfolds in the shared space-time structure of all those present; passers-by and performers form a temporary community in which perception, movement, and reactions interact with each other. In the sense of performance theory (cf. Bohrmann, 2023), the aesthetic experience is not created solely through the planned action of the performers, but in the relational dynamics between bodies, gazes, sounds, and movements in public space; the spectators are part of the choreographic and political situation by virtue of their presence. Their movements – slowing down, walking around, stopping, interacting or ignoring – inscribe themselves performatively into the action.

Narrowing the movement perspective on *City Horses*, the performers show no submissiveness, no aggressive confrontations. Instead, they develop a practice of being in-between: They traverse, interfere, and interweave with the urban (main)streams of movement. The public space is not taken over in the sense of a heroic occupation, but rather played with, traversed, and redesigned: The decisive factor is that the intervention remains deliberately temporary. *City Horses* does not claim the urban space permanently – in contrast to the equestrian statues, whose monumentality is designed for eternity. The movement through the city is a practice of temporary recoding, of briefly opening up other possible spaces. In this way, a feminist appropriation of space is practiced not by taking over, but by overlaying and traversing. To recall Mouffe’s idea of an artistic intervention that produces dissent, the movement itself becomes the means of protest: not frontally, not aggressively, but as a subtle and *soft*, constant rewriting of the body-political cityscape.

5 Conclusion

Still, these equestrian figures are watching over us, from columns, triumphal arches, and horse backs, which brings us to concluding questions about the coeval designing of public space: How can a practice which is fundamentally shaped by its temporality, sustainably leave traces and remain perceptible in its (in)visibility?

Imagining, redesigning, and living a feminist city entails “the need to demand change” and therefore enclines activism (Kern, 2021, p. 118). Whilst *City Horses*, as a form of feminist protest, may “only” produce an ephemeral space through embodied presence and *soft* disruption of everyday patriarchal norms, it does act as an impulse for agency. Hereby, the performer’s moving bodies as horses physically turn away from the position of the flâneur: Instead of detached observation, they embody a mode of being in the city that is sceptical, open, and caring, since the city continues to be a place of freedom and fear (Kern, 2021, p. 11). “The” cities in *City Horses*, although being specific urban environments for each intervention, share historical markers and infrastructures that come from a tradition of patriarchal, eurocentric city planning: building and maintaining equestrian monuments.

A performative intervention carries the possibility to uncover the conservation of the actual state, regarding equestrian monuments: the patriarchal movement regimes of those whose memory we continue to preserve, whose plinths are scrubbed and memorial plaques polished. Embedded in the cityscape, they remain a continuously preserved, passive presence.

If the horse cannot gallop away off its pedestal, throwing off its rider, disrupting the expected hierarchy between control and instinct, it has no other choice but to continue to carry these meaningless figures full of meaning that they have become.

A feminist city is not only planned and built. It consists of bodies in movement, in flesh and bone, in bronze and stone. Feminist action can change the dominant “division of the sensual,” articulated in artistico-activist interventions such as *City Horses*, or microfeminist instants of protest in everyday life, may they be small and *soft* gestures, to uncover and oppose patriarchal movement text.

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