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**Review of Sepa Sama's Doctoral Thesis, artistic and teaching achievements of in the field of art in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation, initiated by the Artistic Discipline Council of the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Arts and Design in Wrocław**

**Basic information**

Sepa Sama, born in Tabriz, Iran, obtained his Bachelor's Degree of Architecture (BA) in the Southern California Institute of Architecture (Sci-Arc), Los Angeles, USA (2008). In 2011, he got a Master's Degree of Architecture and Urban Design degree from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), USA. In 2019, he started a doctorate at the Doctoral School of the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Arts and Design in Wrocław.

**Assessment of creative achievements and artistic activity**

Sepa Sama has been actively involved artistically and scientifically, which resulted in numerous exhibitions, publications, conferences, workshops, and authorial projects. He has a significant record of achievements, including 20 publications (with over 10 books), nearly 40 exhibitions, installations and artistic walks, participation in several urban-architectural projects, a dozen of educational activities or activities related to walking practice (walkshops), guest lectures, participation in several conferences, artistic residencies, mobility within the Erasmus program, improvement courses, as well as being a member of associations and volunteering. The vast majority of these activities are international in scope.

The quality of Sepa Sama's creative work has been recognized by several awards and scholarships (including the Region Blekinge Cultural Scholarship, Sweden, 2020; European Union Social Fund Scholarship, European Commission, 2019; Graham Foundation Grant, Chicago, USA, 2011; UCLA's Fellowship for Graduate Studies, USA, 2010; 2nd Prize, Schengen Sculpture, Design Competition for Artistic Installation, Malta International Airport, 2006)

He has also participated in multiple symposia and conferences, including His Walk, Walk21 Conference, Dublin, Ireland 2022; Notes on Walking, Artistic Research Conference, Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, Riga, Latvia 2022; IMPACT 11 Conference, Hong Kong 2021; Architectural Fantasies, Walk21 Conference, Seoul, Republic of Korea 2021; Notes on Walking, Digital Confrontations Conference at the Gdańsk Academy of Fine Arts, Poland 2020; Philosophy and Cartography Conference, Wrocław, Poland 2019.

Participation in artist-in-residency programs, including Copper Leg Art Residency, Tallinn, Estonia 2022; Frans Masereel Centre Residency, Kasterlee, Belgium 2021; Region Blekinge Cultural Scholarship, Sweden, 2020, and meetings with other artists and researchers (or the lack thereof) during scholarship and artistic residencies significantly influenced the form of the doctoral work, made it possible for the author to share his own artistic strategies, and broadened the range of walking practices (such as walkshops, which the author developed in Sweden).

Sepa Sama listed all his creative activities in the documentation prepared with great care and precision, which testifies to his commitment to work and professional approach.

### **Assessment of didactic, organizational and popularization achievements in the field of art**

Having a closer look at Sepa Sama's teaching and organizational activities, I'd say that the quote by Albert Camus cited by the author best captures his character: "Don't walk in front of me... I may not follow / Don't walk behind me... I may not lead / Walk beside me... just be my friend". That is why walks with students as a way of teaching, or rather learning together, taken by the doctoral student in various parts of the world, have become one of Sepa Sama's teaching methods. Another form adopted by the author to broaden the artistic and research perspective was the use of research walls exhibited in public places, inviting participation and open to confrontation and discussion.

When working with students at the Wrocław Academy, Sepa Sama implemented what he called 'Education on Foot,' focusing primarily on strengthening the skills in conducting art-based research. That was mostly field research based on walking practices, as well as writing and photography. Extensive research on walking as a form of art, as well as his own practice, allowed the doctoral candidate not only to share his knowledge but also to involve students in his own field research.

Another educational form proposed by the doctoral student was to share and promote information about international programs for artists, exhibitions, conferences, scholarships, lectures, and artistic research, i.e., all possible forms of expanding students' artistic knowledge and skills, and often also their language competencies. It should be noted that Sepa Sama's doctoral studies coincided with the pandemic, which necessitated remote work and greatly restricted direct contacts. I have the impression that despite these difficulties, the doctoral student found excellent ways to make this time fruitful for both the students and himself.

## Assessment of the concept and implementation of the doctoral dissertation

Sepa Sama's work submitted for evaluation consists of: 1/ Artist's book **Notes on Walking: Dandelion has no Field / Notatki o chodzeniu: Dmuchawiec bez pola** with original photographs and notes regarding the artistic practice of walking. It is over 600 pages of photographs and texts alphabetically organized in the form of an author's lexicon; 2/ Artist's book **Walking Vaskjala Traveler Letter** with original photographs and notes, the result of an artistic residency in Estonia; 3/ Theoretical dissertation **Walking as Artistic Practice and Research; Notes on Walking: Dandelion has no Field / Chodzenie jako praktyka i badania artystyczne; Notatki o chodzeniu: Dmuchawiec bez pola** that provides a context for the artistic work in which the author describes the methods and artistic strategies chosen and the inspirations behind his actions/research; 4/ A set of **1000 photographs** taken in the course of walking (selected from 60,000 photographs); and 5/ Publication **Dancing in the Dark** which is a documentation of artistic achievements from 2002 to 2022 with links to individual artistic works and projects.

In Sepa Sama's considerations, the creative process is inherently linked to theoretical reflection – artistic actions complement theory, and theory expands the context of artistic work. The doctoral student recalls inspirations for his own pursuits, discusses stages of the creative process, and justifies his choices. He also presents applied artistic methods and strategies and their relation to conceptual assumptions. The main topic of his work, or rather research based on artistic tools, is walking.

Walking is one of the most important skills that humans develop in early life. People usually learn to walk before they learn to speak – around 10–15 months of age. The first step taken by a child is considered a crucial event that opens the door to further development. It is a moment so exceptional to the environment that it is often captured by photography or video. The moment when a child rises from the ground symbolizes the beginning of their exploration of the world and marks the transition from a horizontal to a vertical position. One could say it's a total change of perspective!

Sepa Sama was inspired and fascinated by this primary aspect of human existence. His doctoral work, *Notes on Walking: Dandelion has no Field*, is an artistic project and dissertation in which walking is presented as a way of reasoning. Walking is a fundamental human activity performed for various purposes such as transportation, exercise, or exploring the environment. It can also be a form of meditation, a way to clear the mind and reduce stress, and a way to learn about and admire the natural world and urban environment. In the context of *Notes on Walking: Dandelion has no Field*, the author, as part of the artistic project, explores walking, documenting and systematizing his discoveries in the form of an alphabetical lexicon and various notes. Sepa Sama initially walked to take photographs, but eventually realized that the act of walking itself was his main goal. The book he created is a collection of notes and photographs that capture the subject of walking and its influence on our actions, thoughts, and language in a deep and wide-ranging way.

The author perceives walking not only as a physical activity, but also as an important way of interacting with the world. This approach is consistent with Rebecca Solnit's view that walking is a form of thinking and a way of being in the world. In her book, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*,

Solnit explores the cultural, social, and political significance of walking over the centuries and explores various forms of walking that people have used as a means of exploration, escape, resistance, and reflection. Similarly, Sepa Sama tries to record his feelings and associations during his walks using a camera and concise notes.

As a photographer, Sepa Sama takes on the role of a contemporary flâneur who observes and absorbs the environment. Just like a leisurely wanderer strolling through the streets of a city, Sepa Sama strives to capture and experience the full complexity of urban life through the lens of his camera. The creative process of the photographer, like that of a flâneur, requires a detached yet inquisitive attitude, as well as a perspective that allows them to absorb the sights and sounds of the city without preconceived notions or intentions. In this way, Sepa Sama is both a participant and an observer of the environment, thus establishing a unique relationship with it. The interpretive key to Sepa Sama's work is certainly the experiences of everyday life, perceived in the context of movement, wandering, travel, or change of place. They determine to a large extent the artistic processes and influence the shape of the artwork.

During this doctoral journey, the author was inspired by many artists, writers, and thinkers who refer to the practice of walking. Walking is a cultural phenomenon that has shaped art, literature, and philosophy throughout human history. In ancient Greece, walking was considered a fundamental form of exercise and was used as a therapeutic means to improve physical and mental health. In the Middle Ages, walking pilgrimages were a common form of expression of religious devotion, and many well-known artists and writers, such as William Wordsworth and Henry David Thoreau, described the spiritual and philosophical significance of walking.

However, Sepa Sama's creative process seems to have been greatly influenced by the American conceptual art which he confronted during his studies in Los Angeles. Ed Ruscha's direct photographic registration method had a profound impact on the doctoral student, causing the Californian artist to become a key figure for him. In terms of artistic walking practice, Ruscha's works are one of the significant examples of "walking as art", where the act of walking and the subsequent documentation of the journey become a work of art. Ruscha's walk along Sunset Boulevard can be regarded as a deliberate act of observation and documentation that reveals deeper cultural and social patterns of the city. The book is a record of the artist's physical journey and a representation of the man-made environment. It can also be interpreted as a way of exploring the relationship between the individual and the urban landscape. We observe a similar method in the presented doctoral thesis.

Referring to Sepa Sama's experiences of living in America, it is worth mentioning that movement as such has played a significant role in shaping American culture and is still an important aspect of that country's identity. America is a country of total mobility and circulation, of absolute market value and cyclical, incessant, and endless exchange - this approach to American culture as based on movement is a central theme in Jean Baudrillard's book *America* (1986). The road infrastructure has been recognized as a realization of the American spirit also by Frank Lloyd Wright: Think of man's long pilgrimage and his roads. Think of the roads in America that opened up a new world. These roads are not just a means of transportation, they are a monument. They are part of the American landscape. They are an American achievement - Wright claims in his writings. The specific fascination with

mobility and transience must have left a mark on the doctoral student, who during his studies in the USA was also involved in research projects related to urban, sociological, and social phenomena.

The title of Sepa Sama's thesis, *Notes on Walking*, reflects his creative strategy, combining it with conceptual art. The conceptual procedure, based on the direct registration of reality, became the basis of his doctoral work. In the 1960s and 1970s, conceptual artists sought to challenge traditional norms and values of the art world and question the very definition of art itself. This movement viewed the creation of written notes, letters, and instructions as a legitimate form of art-making, equally important and significant as traditional objects and images. The emergence of conceptual art coincided with a broader shift towards interdisciplinary and systemic approaches in the arts and humanities, which made publishing notes and instructions an effective way of expressing complex ideas and processes in a concise manner. This approach is reminiscent of Susan Sontag's famous text *Notes on Camp*, which Sepa Sama cites as one of the main inspirations for his methodology.

The strategy of perceiving art more as an activity than the production of luxury goods also reflects the author's conceptual attitude. Sepa Sama turned his life experience of being a nomad into an artistic practice.

An important part of the doctoral student's work was a stay in Sweden at a residency, where he developed something he calls a "walkshop" (a play on words of "workshop"), which is a kind of walking workshop or walking as a workshop activity. And above all, walking as a form of performative art. This practice by Sepa Sama relates to the work of artists such as Richard Long, who was known for creating temporary works of art during walks in nature.

Other significant artists who use walking as a central element of their practice include Hamish Fulton, who creates art inspired by his walks in nature, and Simon Pope, who explores urban landscapes to document issues of gentrification and revitalization. Canadian artist Janet Cardiff invites participants to explore urban spaces through her audio walks, while Belgian artist Francis Alÿs uses walking as a means of engaging with social and political issues. These are just a few examples among many artists using walking as a form of artistic expression, which has a long and rich history and remains an important element of contemporary art practice. Currently, Sepa Sama is also part of this international movement.

During the art-based research project of *Walking Notes*, Sepa Sama referred to over 200 texts about walking to create a context. He also wrote thousands of notes about walking to outline the topic. His book is archival in nature and comprehensively covers the topic of walking, showing how many aspects of human existence it touches, both literally and metaphorically, through both the body and language. The character of the work is intimate and personal, marked by the author's own experiences, as walking, as the author himself writes, is a fundamental experience of human existence and an important way of getting to know oneself from the very beginning of human existence. In summary, *Notes on Walking: Dandelion has no Field* is a unique and comprehensive visual study of the topic of walking.

## Conclusion

After familiarizing myself with the rich body of work of the doctoral student, I am convinced that Sepa Sama is an extremely active, reflective, and inquisitive person. The doctoral thesis demonstrates an understanding of the creative process and a high awareness of the actions taken. The dissertation work confirms the knowledge, intellectual potential, and artistic awareness of the doctoral student. I read this work with great interest and genuine pleasure.

The series of works by Sepa Sama, aspiring to the status of a doctoral thesis, meets all requirements both artistically and scientifically. It is a well-thought-out, mature realization properly complemented by its conceptual and contextual significance, and the formal means used attest to artistic maturity and demonstrate a high awareness of form and cultural context.

After reviewing the work, it can be stated that Sepa Sama's work is characterized by a high level of artistic quality, constituting a thorough analysis of his previous artistic achievements, as well as an original perspective on the artistic-research problem he has undertaken. The doctoral thesis *Notes on Walking: Dandelion has no Field / Notatki o chodzeniu: Dmuchawiec bez pola*, as well as the creative, didactic, and organizational activities aimed at popularizing art, fulfill all the requirements posed on the theses aimed for obtaining the PhD degree.

Considering all the above and the overall artistic activity of the candidate, I support the motion of the Artistic Discipline Council of the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław to award Sepa Sama the PhD degree in the field of art, in the discipline *fine arts and art conservation*.

Furthermore, being impressed by the PhD thesis of Sepa Sama, I am submitting a request for its distinction to the Artistic Discipline Council of the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Arts and Design in Wrocław.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Magdalena Krawiec', written in a cursive style.

Opole, February 13, 2023