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Playing the space

Resonance, improvisation, variations of urban ambiances

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Abstract. *Visual representations and emphasis of the individual hide the complexity of the urban collective actions. Social and natural rhythms compose the immediate, intuitive expression of urban ambiances. In this artistic research project the intention is to, by experimentation, reveal qualities, temporal aspects and embodied perceptions of the social ambience situations that constitute the corporeal collective rhythm of the city. Immersed in the situation, in situ, as pedestrians, citizens, artists and researchers we take part in and invite “the audience” to participate in playful events. “Bodies in motion” serve as scale, tool and reference system in methodological approaches, based on concepts as resonance, improvisations and variations, as both descriptions of urban life and practical tools for collective actions.*

Keywords: *play, in situ, resonance, improvisation, variations, artistic research*

Research problem

Graphical expressions serve as the main tools for communicating urban, architectural and material design. This cultural preference gives a clear priority to vision and to spatial dimensions at the expense of inter-sensorial experience. An exclusively graphical conception “visualizes” the city, frequently excluding temporal, rhythmic phenomena and its dynamic life. This abstraction, translated into “scenographical” spaces, only to often reduce users to simple observers of an immutable “view-scape” (Augoyard, 1991). The user’s embodied experience is, however, essentially dynamic. Firstly, because people are active players, who modify space through daily actions, so as spatial awareness arise in everyday itineraries. Secondly, because experiences of space results from local practices conditioned by cultural, social, natural and climatic cycles.

Purpose and aims

In order to establish a more dynamic understanding of the city, we need to explore expressions of urban complexity manifested in situations where the subject is the collective, not the individual. The most immediate, intuitive expressions of this plurality are the rhythmical patterns and ambiances it “composes”. By “playing the space” in a literal way this project aims to contribute to a better understanding of this urban complexity by widening the range of methods through:

- Developing an approach of research based on and expressed by urban dynamics.
- Introducing *in situ* artistic processes and methods based on subtle transformations of daily situations through the concepts of *resonance, improvisation* and *variation*.
- Developing appropriate documentation and communication tools – *urban kaleidoscope* – able to transmit this situated fragmented experience of urban phenomena.

Playing the space

Our interventions start off with how a daily experience of a voyage, a place or a walk (pro-) poses a question concerning the way it is “used”, in relation to its mythologies, the architectural intentions and its historical role. Immersed in the common situation we try to understand it by following its rhythms and movements. The strength of this methodical approach is that pedestrians, citizens and the artistic researchers act in a common situation, that can serve both as descriptions of daily social life and practical tools for actions. By *variations* of those situations – interruption and breaks, by instruments and vocal expressions, change of common movements and by combinations of events “out of place” – we transform the place into a playground. By creating new situations within the existing we established another awareness of urban qualities and meanings.

Artistic methods and research

In order to describe urban phenomena, social sciences have traditionally used “non invasive” techniques, first understood as “neutral” observations. With development of qualitative survey methods it became obvious that the researcher couldn’t avoid influencing the observed phenomena (Thibaud & Grosjean, 2001). The emergence of practise-based methods in the field of “artistic research” represents a serious questioning of the research principle of neutrality, by introducing new ways of “exploring by interfering”.

However, ordinary urban experiences remain hidden by its inherent “banal” nature. Inspired by Garfinkel’s “breaching experiments”, Thibaud (2001) suggests methods based on unexpected modifications of the daily conditions of a place while it is being experienced. The geographer Tim Cresswell (1996:10) agrees that the “moment of transgression marks the shift from unspoken, unquestioned power of place” instantly separating “what is in place to that which is out of place”.

With the introduction of artistic research, situations can be studied from a new perspective where modification of interesting phenomena is a prior condition to examination. The contrast between ordinary and “strange” situations reveals both the importance of habit in relation to place and alternation as means to “become aware” of normative forces (Rose, 1999). Moreover those “processes of actualisation” reveals memories, conflicts, and layers of meaning (Grosz, 1999).

Site-Specific artwork

Even in some site-specific artwork the everyday experience is both subject and object of an intervention and the difference between research and art practice are unclear. This is the case of the Canadian artist Janet Cardiff’s *Walks* (Cardiff & Schaub, 2005) in different cities. Confronted with immaterial dimensions in terms of sensorial and embodied experiences with combinations of recorded sound, stories, voices and footsteps, the walk establishes new patterns through history, memories making the ordinary place familiar and strange.

Another important reference, the sound artist Bill Fontana’s *in situ* installations have questioned, since the 70’s, relations between visual and aural dimensions.¹ He produces “installations that use sound as a sculptural medium to interact with and transform our perceptions of visual and architectural settings”, in “the total transformation of the visible by the invisible”.

This idea of exploring the invisible by listening is also present in the *electrical walks* of the German artist Christina Kubisch. At the end of the 70’s Kubisch developed a magnetic headphone translating the electric fields into sound. “The perception of everyday reality changes when one listens to the electrical fields; what is accustomed appears in a different context.

1. E.g. *Acoustical visions of Venice, Biennale of 1999*; <http://resoundings.org>

Nothing looks the way it sounds. And nothing sounds the way it looks”.²

Also the American sound artist Max Neuhaus (1994) emphasizes the complexity of daily experience in his place and moment pieces by working with “awareness by negation”: “The moment pieces don’t construct places, but they cause this realization of place to happen when they disappear”.

In this brief review of selected relevant artwork the citizen becomes “a citizen of the work” not just a consumer of the pre-established (Andueza, 2010). Neuhaus (1994) expresses his view: “I see these works [...] as catalysts for shifts in frame of mind”.

Rhythm – a knowledge paradox

Interactions between citizen/environment have been examined through concepts such as rhythm, ambience and identity. The concept of *rhythm* is particularly relevant as a direct expression of the body and environment mutually defining each other (Grosz, 1995). From the diverse musical languages to dance, theatre, literature or other art disciplines, *rhythm* represents an embodied expression of time in terms of movement (real or represented). Expressions of rhythm allow the composer to depict a lived urban space in its metamorphic, immersive and ubiquitous nature (Augoyard & Torgue, 2006).

One of the main efforts towards the practical implementation of rhythm theory is the rhythm-analytical method proposed by Lefebvre (1996). From the window he notes how life in the street follows rhythmical orders, patterns, and re-occurring sequences, an overview resembling a map, but including movements and sounds. Down, in the street, these rhythms evolve into multi-dimensional experiences, where all senses are brought into play. This discrepancy shows the importance of different forms of knowledge: the consciously analytical and the experienced. Research with a rhythmic approach is rare, perhaps because of the paradox it poses: rhythms cannot consciously be analysed in the middle of an ongoing situation and for an external analysis their meanings remain elusive (Mels, 2004; Koch & Sand, 2010). “Yet, to capture a rhythm one needs to have been captured by it. Just as in music or when learning a language, one only really understands meanings and sequences by producing them” (Lefebvre, 1996:219).

To follow and become immersed in the flows of urban space is almost a social and cultural must; breaking or deviating from a given rhythm create conflicts between spatial orders and powers over the definitions of time and space (Cresswell, 1996).

The question is how relations between citizens and cities can be analysed without losing complexity? And how to handle the discrepancy between distanced overview and engaged participation?

Methods and tools – resonance, improvisation and variations

In order to understand urban complexity and ambiances composed of the interaction of material and immaterial elements (Amphoux *et al.*, 2004), our methods and tools need to be chosen according to the description of the situated experience of urban ambiances; understood as a living expression of human–environment interaction allowing recognition, identification of the place, but also appropriation and integration (Atienza, 2008). Our purpose is to reinterpret the daily experience of urban space closely related to the place, in order to “actualise” other expressions and relations (Grosz, 1999) where the moving body is our scale and reference system.

From the concepts *Resonance, Improvisation and Variations* we develop methods, tools and strategies, inherent in common urban situations:

2. www.christinakubisch.de

Resonance

is the basic sensory experience between the human body and place in terms of energy: motion, vibration, sound, light, texture, etc. The body is itself a resonant system with voice, steps, breathing, in interaction with the built environment. Resonance *becomes* the very “process of formation and transformation” of the city and its inhabitants (Thibaud, 2010).

By *resonance* we “learn” to know the space through our bodies in space (scale, texture, dimensions, materials), start a dialogue, and listening to the response of the space. For example we are using instruments, movements and voices; screaming, shouting, whispering, singing, so that sounds, movements and instruments compose a rhythmical conversation within the social, cultural environment of which we are part.³ Where can you be heard, hear yourself and others, and in what way?

Improvisation

is an important part of daily life reminiscent of musical improvisation; never based in impulses and free forms, rather in visibility and self-regulation by controlling impulses and adapt to a basic system of rules, rhythms, patterns and gestures (Rose, 1999).⁴

By *improvisation* the dialogue between body and space becomes deeper. To be able to improvise you need to know the space, its rhythm and its structure. Resonance, though, is more like a closed process were you, like an echo, shout and await the answer. Improvisation is a more open process offering, as in a conversation, a continuous flow or walk. By resonance we act *in place and in time*, while improvisation can be *out of place and time*.

Variations

Between those two phases *variations* serve as transformations of daily situations, by interventions in public situations with interruptions, breaks, events “out of place”, and subtle changes that allows a close interaction with the collective setting. Several strategies can be applied: amplify, erase, distort, interfere, deviate, difference, transgress, etc. Many of the examples reviewed, explore *variations* in order to reveal daily qualities and new aspects of the situation. While resonance and improvisation correspond to modes of interaction with the environment, variation works at the limit of perception and attention, allowing a closer and stronger interaction within common urban phenomena.

Public places as playground

Public places, of interest for our explorations, compose the city by its functions and historical ideals of the self-governed citizen (Rose, 1999) on the move, in the streets and in public space.

The Metro

Public transport both expresses and composes a specific urban rhythm with a direct corporeal awareness of distances between home and work, centre and suburbs, surface and underground, its indestructible material and the human sensible body, building up a social system of “Memories”, “Solitudes” and “Correspondences” (Augé, 2002).⁵

Streets

Walking serves as a rhythmic method (*metà hodós* = *along the road*). By *walking* the same

3. vimeo.com/16468322, vimeo.com/15317765

4. vimeo.com/album/1594110

5. vimeo.com/album/1526235

street during different periods, days, seasons, on different surfaces, weather, speed, shoes, the city emerges step by step (Sand, 2008, 2009).⁶

Public space

The Greek *agora* and its organisation of commerce, rituals, justice as the very beginning of democracy (Deutsche, 1996; Arendt, 1958) unite the understanding of contemporary protests in North Africa and the concept of “freedom of expression”. The Egyptian sound artist Mahmoud Refat suggests that the architecture at Tahrir square, from the 60s, supported the revolution; the resonance and echo of shouting voices, rhythmic songs, stamping feet and car horns, created a supportive ambience. The question is what activities our western commercialized “public” places support and what we are free to express?⁷

Documentation tools – urban kaleidoscope

In our explorations, time and body become the essential research tools, with the aim to grasp the *expression*, rather than our impression of the situation. Thus notation, video and sound are employed as active mediators of the experience instead of documentation of “what happened”. The challenge of representing complex simultaneous rhythmical patterns has been tackled in different disciplines (Sällström, 1991). For contemporary composers and choreographers the search of an appropriate notation system able to represent and communicate sound or bodies in motion has been crucial. Beyond these, we face the challenge of real-time notation of immersed urban ambiances.

Sound in contrast to images, is a qualitative expression of time, containing dynamic information of urban characteristic and rhythmical patterns of interaction between a place, its intrinsic temporalities and uses. As complement to sound, video presents visual dimensions of scale, position, orientation and motion from a “point of view”.

The integrated fragmentation fundamental to urban phenomena, change the view of documentation. By *in situ* interventions experiences of resonance, improvisations and subtle changes, by recordings, video and notations we aim to construct a multifaceted urban kaleidoscope, giving life to the expressions of urban dynamics.

Conclusion

Architecture, urban planning and social science are demanding methods able to describe and comprehend the living expressions of public spaces and to analyse and predict the dynamics of inhabitant’s practices. The dialogue of qualitative and quantitative methods, of spatial, social and technical disciplines characterising ambience and rhythm theories is an essential condition for addressing the contradiction between abstraction of planning and urban “(dis-)organization”. As citizens, artists and researchers we explore the rhythmical urban ambiances embodying the relation between human, built environments and natural cycles (Hillier, 2007) by (re)composing and playing the space.

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6. vimeo.com/23475831, vimeo.com/11833311

7. vimeo.com/album/1617161, vimeo.com/15317765, vimeo.com/36692842

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