

Atelier Art et re-action (Area)

Performing Urban Routines and Rituals

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Abstract. *This paper presents a series of contemporary artistic methods and collective actions based on the pioneering work of the French avantgarde group Art et action (Aea, 1919-1939). Aea actively responded to the fast-changing society of their time through their innovative “theatre laboratory”, an experimental artistic research environment in which actors and audience were invited to investigate together the rhythmic order of urban routines and rituals, through the re-enactment of daily urban atmospheres. Based on Aea’s methods and concepts, atelier Area aims at responding to today’s deep physical, sensorial and social transformation of the city by re-acting contemporary urban routines and rituals through public improvisations and interventions. Three concrete examples will be presented here.*

Keywords: *Art et action, urban routines and rituals, re-action, artistic research methods*

Performing Urban Routines and Rituals in the Avant-garde

AEA was inspired by, and a result of, the avant-garde movements at the beginning of last century. New technologies, electricity, machines and transportation deeply transformed the city and the modes of inhabiting, with new daily routines and rituals. The city became a performance space, a scenography as well as an actor (Tillberg, 2003). The Futurists, Dadaists, Constructivists, and other avant-garde movements - Bauhaus in Germany, VKhUTEMAS in Moscow as well as the group AEA in Paris - re-interpreted the city through full-scale experiments and re-performances of daily city life, through innovative working processes intersecting art and research. Art and politics were combined, whilst staging urban daily life (Tillberg 2003, Read 2014). The aim was to break down the boundaries between disciplines, between audience and performers, and to provoke reactions. Artistic and research-based experiments were conducted both on the street and on stage, evolving a laboratory to critically explore urban structures and movements. Transmission between the unpredictable complexity of the urban and the laboratory’s spatial demarcation, created a tension between everyday life, and the effort to stage it, through which it could be re-acted, acted out and played with.

Art et Action (AEA)

The group *AEA* (1919-39), led by artist/actress Louise Lara and architect Edouard Autant, staged an experimental research laboratory. In five “dramatic structures” they explored different aspects of urban life with an aim to erase the boundaries between audience and performers, between daily life and representation. Actors and audience were invited to investigate, in open improvisations, the rhythmic order of *routines* that define daily urban life, together with social *rituals* as creation of social meaning. Through daily and cyclical re-performances, citizens and visitors relate to the city, as well as each other, by repeating, re-producing and re-performing social beliefs and a cultural rhythmic structure.

AEA's work was founded on the activations of two connected spatial situations: the complex urban reality in which they intervened, and the theatre stage, where this reality could be re-presented, framed and re-activated. This made it possible to try-out alternatives to urban questions, and to bring ideas back *in-situ*, testing them in real urban situations: a working process that mutually influenced the place and its representations.

AEA compiled an extensive anthology, an inspiring archive that covers much of their work, including among other elements, methodological texts and significant urban questions (Autant & Lara 1952). Their intense search for methods to re-present contemporary issues, incorporating research through and with art, may certainly be valuable in our contemporary context. Not least since they offered an alternative to the modernist and functionalist architecture promoted by Le Corbusier and CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*). The innovative work of *AEA* has almost been forgotten, although there are a few texts addressing their work from a single disciplinary perspective, thereby missing its complexity and critical richness. These include a doctoral thesis by historian Michel Corvin (1976) focusing on *AEA*'s theatrical approach, and a recent work by architect Gray Read (2014) on architecture as a performing art. Most of *AEA*'s a-disciplinary working process can still be considered as entirely innovative with respect to artistic practice, academic research or urban planning. We miss an insight into their advanced methods of relating urban situations with explorative laboratory experiments.

Methods by Art et Action (AEA) - Re-Presenting the City

For the modernists, the city was essentially a stage inspired by fine art: a visual set design. *AEA* instead proposed architecture as a performing art that made citizens collectively engage in a rhythmic simultaneity of actions and voices (Read 2014). This major difference could explain *per se* their relatively marginal impact. *AEA* produced creative reactions to urban transformation, and acted these out on the stage. They left their complete material (Autant & Lara 1952) with no description of conclusions or specific results, inviting instead the reader to try out their methods through action. An archive of methods thus replaced the usual collection of past events. With its creative combinations of performance art, research experiments and creative pedagogy, they legated a highly relevant compilation of strategies to be re-activated for those in search of artistic and spatial tools. For *AEA*, performing arts should be similar to daily urban life: a fusion of multiple simultaneous events, configuring an open situation impossible to contain or control.

Through a theatre-like laboratory *process* including improvisations, reading, repetitions and re-actions, they combined social, cultural and historical re-presentations of urban

complexity. Exploring experimental artistic principles of simultaneous collective actions, they dissolved the division between daily life and artistic representation. For *AEA*, theatre embodied a non-hierarchical space where performers and audience could gather, interact and perform the public *piazza*. The complexity of their work resembles human experience; they selected tools and inspiration from every aspect of history, culture and society and tested these out in space. The fragmentation of knowledge into fields and disciplines was thus deeply questioned; human actions and experiences could not be separated into disciplines; their approach moved beyond the notion of inter-disciplinarity, and could rather be characterised “a-disciplinary”.

Art et re-Action (AREA): working process and method

Through this project, the concept *re-action* will be employed as a method of re-activating and re-working history in the footsteps of *AEA*; to *react* to the contemporary situation by *re-acting* historical material and methods – thus our project title: *Atelier Art et re-action*.

Our working process is inspired by and follows the path opened up by *AEA* with collective interventions and experiments. In line with *AEA*, we understand routines and rituals as the embodied, rhythmic and spatial expression of the social structure and creation of meaning taking place. Within this frame, this research project connects two key spatial and embodied experiences. The first, *in-situ*, relating to the use of public space - the complex but common experience of place. The second, in the *Atelier*, relating to the re-activation and re-presentation of urban complexity. In this second instance, the complex reality can be framed, explored and performed in a more controlled spatial setting.

Explorations and re-activations of contemporary urban experiences provides us with the material and immaterial *content*, whilst the work of *AEA* offers a *methodological frame* for the process. The research process is built on the innovative relation between explorations *in situ* and the space of re-presentation, *the atelier*.

In line with *AEA*, we extract daily situations from their context and explore their potential out-of-place, in the *Atelier*. *Atelier AREA* functions as a “place of representation” as a frame for an action-based reflection on the *in situ* experiences. Within this frame, the collected material *in-situ* can be re-presented, e.g. presented again, in a new spatial setting that allows for experiments, explorations, and re-interpretations inspired by *AEA*’s archive of methods. The aim here is to learn from both the *in-situ* experiences and the historical narrations, in order to decode present situations and questions.

In a collective process, the collected urban material is re-acted and analysed by groups of invited artists, researchers, practitioners, citizens and students, in staged urban situations in which participants take part, and explore different roles. *AEA* developed five theatre laboratories¹, each of them focusing a specific urban situation. *AREA* is instead structured in five “ateliers”, renamed according to the contemporary questions and methods explored. Each one takes place in different public places of representation. In this paper, three of these are presented through a specific action:

¹ Aea’s 5 theatre laboratories: Théâtre choréique (Choral Theatre), de l’espace (of Space), du livre (of the Book), de chambre (Chamber Theatre), universitaire (University Theatre).

Atelier Resonance

Re-interpretation of AEA's *Théâtre choréique*, focused on the sonic and sensorial urban experience. Atelier Resonance is conceived for an auditorium or stage in which participants re-play the sound of public life, the sonic signatures of collective/individual actions and of sensorial experiences collected *in-situ* (Sand & Atienza 2016). Playing with, repeating, re-interpreting roles and rhythms through resonance and different open and interactive forms of corporeal, instrumental or electro-mechanical sonic manifestations.



City experiment, a part of the exhibition *Experiment Stockholm*, Färgfabriken, 2015.² During the course *Sound Art: listening, resonating, intervening*, students from Konstfack (University of Arts, Crafts & Design, Stockholm) experimented with sound, movement and choreographies both in the city and in an exhibition space. The aim was to re-act, activate and interact with this space by using sonic objects of different nature as well as collective body movements. By playing the space we learn an awareness of how to resonate with and in space.

Each participant brought along a series of “sonic objects”, either in the form of everyday materials, urban recordings and compositions, or their own body and voice as a sound source. These materials and tools were necessarily related to existing urban sounds, movements and objects, and they were collected during preparatory *in situ* experiments in Stockholm. In the exhibition space, we collectively performed a series of preparatory sound and motion exercises, exploring how we were simultaneously activated by the room, while also activating it with our presence and actions. During multiple short sessions, focusing on different characteristics of ambience, we devised together a series of methods and tools to improvise in an increasingly complex interactive context.

The purpose of these spatial experiments was to build an awareness of, as well as an active approach to the complex social, sensorial and mobile elements composing our daily urban environments. Through collective interaction, we studied how meaningful relationships are created between the city and its inhabitants, and how these can be consciously developed and influenced.

Atelier Revival

Re-interpretation of AEA's *Théâtre du livre*, focused on artistic and literary representations of the city. Within the Atelier Revival, historical urban situations represented in literature, music, film, and the scenic arts in general, are re-acted, confronted and hybridised with re-presentations of contemporary urban situations and physical configurations. It takes its form through collective reading sessions, historical walks, and sonic corporeal improvisations.

² Video documentation of this action : <https://vimeo.com/149003424>



Cries of London, collective action at the symposium *Archives, Art and Activism: Exploring Critical Heritage Approaches to Global Societal Challenges*, University College London, UCL, 2016³. This action staged an urban public situation connected to the UCL-site. With our voices and other expressions we re-activated the historical market presented in Orlando Gibbons' musical piece *The Cries of London*, 1620. This historical atmosphere was brought into confrontation with the contemporary/future market described in the policy document *UCL 2034. A new 20-year strategy for UCL*⁴. The activation staged the transformation of the market from material products to fulfil daily needs (Gibbons) into abstract future products with uncertain modes and needs. Education has become a commodified product on the market possible to be sold and consumed.

Atelier Traces

Re-interpretation of AEA's *Théâtre de l'espace*, focused on collective and simultaneous urban experience and construction. The aim of *Atelier Traces* is to explore the experience of the ordinary material and immaterial components of the urban environments. On the multiple and diverse traces of our daily activities and routines. These elements are collected, observed and presented in a new frame of experience in friction with their original context. A tension that should provide a new perspective, an acknowledgement of their presence and what they represent as traces of daily life.



Sonopticon, collective sound installation, Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm, 2018⁵. In collaboration with the *Sound in Interaction* Professional Course at Konstfack, in December 2018, this sound intervention arose from the remarkable architectural form and placement of Bonniers Konsthall's library space: a panopticon within the heart of the city, a lighthouse from which the dense and complex surrounding urban atmospheres can be observed in silence, insulated by a glass curtain wall. The intervention thus took the form of a sonic overlay – playing with this simultaneous inside/outside orientation, and the resulting disjunctions between what the audience will see and hear.

The installation was conceived and realized collectively, through a series of custom-built sounding objects created from found materials in the area, and distributed in the space

³ Video documentation: <https://vimeo.com/140061139>

⁴ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/2034/>

⁵ Video documentation at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZ3uQmlox5Q>

to create a sonic ecosystem. A large collection of sonic textures and objects was also collectively drawn from the surrounding atmospheres, with each material simultaneously referencing a point on the visual horizon. All these physical and aural elements were spatialized and placed in dialogue to create a site-specific and immersive experience.

This immersion into quotidian urban sounds, in friction with the visual contemplation of their original environment, aimed at triggering an awareness and a new attention in the audience. Awareness of their daily physical and sensorial environment, and of the interactions established. Furthermore, drawing attention to the collective construction of these surrounding atmospheres, and thus to our role and responsibility as active constructors of our everyday environments.

Conclusion:

The latin prefix *re-* marks that something either is repeated, comes back or is made anew, re-constructed and re-interpreted. The concept *re-search*, with the meaning to search and search again, cannot be abstracted mainly to methods, theories, and concepts. Rather a spatial rhythm of difference and repetition engages the body of the researchers in performing re-search as an achievement and enactment in a spatial and temporal context (Sand, 2018). Human actions, such as daily routines and social rituals are re-actions in its double sense; repetition of embodied spatial expressions and response to the social configurations and transformations taking place in and by society. There is important knowledge to be gained through re-turning, but also re-inventing through re-activations and re-actions. Rather than a mere repetition of AEA's work, we intend a *re-action*; a reaction to the complex transformations of the contemporary city, a re-activation of art history, a re-action and re-presentation of urban questions in a fruitful and poetic way.

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