

Chapter 7

Playing the Space: Resonance, Re-action, and the Conference Re(s)on-Art

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In this article we present the research project *In situ-action: Resonance, Improvisation, and Variations of Public Space* (VR 2011-2014) best known under its intriguing operational title *Playing the Space*.¹ With the invitation to play, artists, architects, researchers and students have acted out, in playful collective interventions, complex urban situations and in various interpretations of play transformed public space into a common playground.

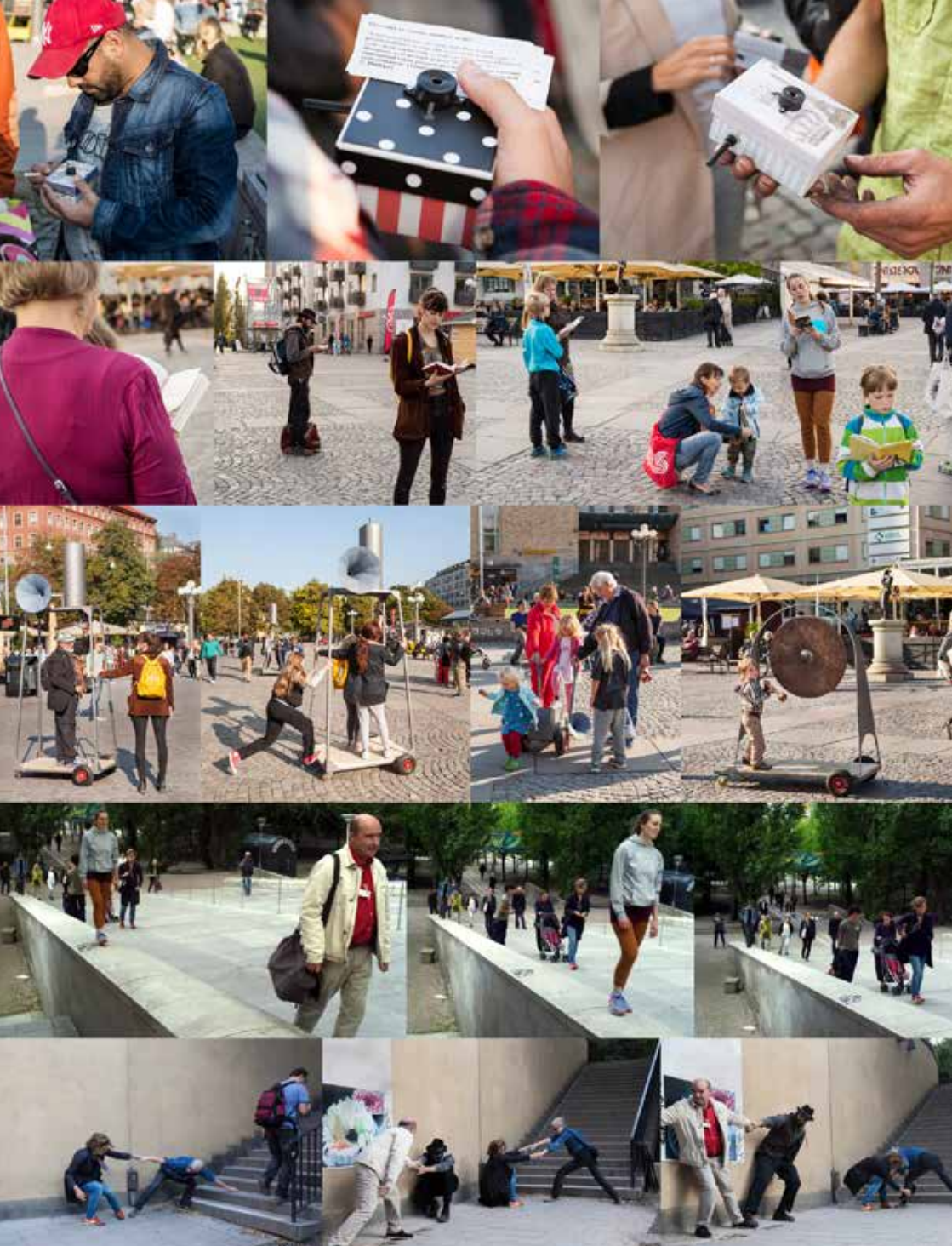
However fun it is to 'play the space' this work has seriously confronted us with the spatial, social and sensory conflicts and frictions that define contemporary cities; space dedicated to global tourism and consumption increases at the expense of public space. Global forces of displacement have made basic human needs visible, either as desirable consumer goods or as people without housing or other basic needs, i.e. human rights, populating the shopping streets. Today the urban situation has made public art performance almost impossible. In this extreme worldwide commercialization of cities, not only has public space decreased, art itself has been reduced to amusement,

such that public performances have become just another way of promoting 'the creative city'.

During this period of public research, we explored public space in terms of response-ability; playing the space has become a method for reacting to, interacting with and re-activating crucial and critical urban spatial issues: How and with what means are we able to respond to contemporary urban questions and challenges? To respond is to express and to influence our common ground, thus questioning the individual, the neutralizing effect of commercialization, and thus the silenced voices.

The function and location of new buildings are often hard to distinguish, constructed as they are within the same design paradigm; is it a bank or a university, is it meant for the desert or the icy north? Whether in terms of content or function, buildings are resulting from a joint design ideology; spatial and temporal neutralization understood as user-friendly and defined in terms of safety and security. Neutralization is an ideological tool, brought about through construction by employing indestructible materials to keep out the local climate, weather conditions or other sensorial

¹ playingthespace.wordpress.com



Re(s)on-Art 2014,

Medborgarplatsen
Stockholm

Collage: Ricardo Atienza
Photo: Matti Östling,
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components. Instead of negotiating and composing with the components of place, artificial lights and perfumes, recorded sounds and other sensorial elements make visitors adapt to a commercial around-the-clock rhythm aimed at replacing corporeal rhythms rooted in daily cycles and seasons (Kärrholm 2013:73ff). Seamlessly, without any friction, visitors find themselves disconnected from spatial, temporal and corporeal rhythmic dimensions, surfing (Deleuze 1992:6). This neutral architecture has not arisen to protect the citizen from the environment (bad weather, etc.), but to protect the private consumption domain. Spatial neutralization is the result of a safety culture where the citizen becomes a potential threat. The tourist, the ultimate consumer, often understood as the potential saviour of remote dying locations and a target for city branding and urban transformations, serves as a model, which affects not only public space but also domestic environments, transforming daily life into consumption and marketable goods. The inhabitants find themselves living in and being a part of some new form of urban attraction park, a historical scenography, serving as an image rather than an organization of daily life. With resistant and indestructible materials, the architecture is far from neutral; it

is part of an aggressive design ideology that separates places from their users and the individual from the society as a common concern. How does the citizen become able to respond to an urban planning primarily supporting the identity of a consumer, not supposed to leave any durable trace, either visual or audible? Time as a process has thus been banished from such an idea of what an urban environment should be like today: no trace, no alteration and as little climate and external sensorial impact as possible.

Our research methods have been developed within the dynamics of performance art history and contemporary art, so that we understand the present urban situation as a resonance of the daily ongoing life, as well as of the past. Through this artistic practice and research we have developed resonance (re-sonare = re-sounding) as a site-specific method and a theoretical concept, in which other artistic methods, such as walking, re-activations and various theories, are developed. Resonance occurs as a result of what's happening in a space, involving all senses and relations in such space; largely sonic, tactile and sensitive, it manifests the overall experience of daily life within its immaterial, continuous and elusive expression (Sand

& Atienza 2012, Sand 2014). Thus resonance as an artistic/research method intensifies an extended listening that takes place between bodies and space in its full complexity. Far from an individual reflective distance, a group of researchers/artists involve themselves in, listen to and influence the situation in an ongoing communication that takes place between bodies and space; between the audible/visible, past/present, facts/fiction, matter/language (Sand 2012). Another awareness of urban qualities, limits and forces emerges through playful interruptions, repetitions, and variations of common movements and events 'out of place'.

If neutralization of public space is one of the most common strategies today, resonance is a dangerous tool as it creates an active and critical response to the way we inhabit and act within public space, which draws us out of the seemingly neutral position of an individual consumer. We act and re-act together. What makes this approach fruitful and interesting is that we as artists and researchers can never be neutral or objective, as we both become influenced by and influence urban situations and society as a whole. Resonance is a practical, sensorial and corporeal method, in which the artist/researcher vibrates (i.e. resonates)

with the environment, while creating immediate responses.

As one of the main methods during the process, we invited artists, practitioners, and researchers from different fields to bring their own questions and methods to different activations, so that we could explore them, in situ, one at a time together. One significant example is LUR, Live Urban Radio, in which the aim was to collectively experience, question and share urban ambiences in ordinary but unexpected ways, in collective actions composed of series of interventions based on each participant's methods, and to transform the in-situ experience into 12 short podcasts, April 2013 (Sand, Atienza 2014).

On the other hand musicians, dancers and composers were invited to play the space in specific places or exhibitions where the general public could take part either in a walk, sound production, or building as part of an exhibition in, for example, the sonic Tourist Walks in Stockholm City Hall, December 2011.

The exhibition Glänta, Uppsala Cathedral, November 2012, invited the audience to walk around freely in the

exhibition even during the public programme while a group of musicians explored the space by sonic and choreographic means. In addition pedagogical programmes were developed during the periods in which different stations contributed to different sensations of the space in relation to the senses.

Re(s)on-Art, an international artistic research conference with action in public space

Instead of trying to build on the knowledge and skills acquired as artists, art institutions have forcefully adopted and even extended a logo-centric perspective on art and artistic research. Through our own presence at several conferences in different fields, we had the opportunity to question the basic structure of written paper presentations; mainly because artistic practice and research have developed many other ways of transmitting knowledge, methods, compilation of documentations and results based in corporeal, temporal, spatial aspects. Even in conferences dedicated to the body and to actions, the written and spoken word is front and centre. During a conference with endless papers presented (mostly in today's academic

international English) the body starts to react and complain. In some conference presentations we have tried to create alternative presentations with walks, vocal and spatial activations of different kinds, often appreciated by other participants or met with sceptical questions, but in general this logo-centric structure remains intact.

Finally we decided to critically explore another way of sharing knowledge and methods among artists and researchers with a background in art; we decided to organize an international artistic research conference, Re(s)on-Art with actions in public space on 3-5 September 2014 in Stockholm. Remarkably about 25 artists/researchers from ten different countries in Europe, Asia, North and Latin America attended the conference.

With the aim of exploring daily public situations and encouraging daily urban awareness through collective actions in situ, the main question for the conference was: how do we share the artistic research methods and knowledge, emerging through practice, with other artists/researchers?

Described as 'the art of resonating with, in, and through the city', the explorations took the form of careful interventions, based in the participants' own research and artistic practice. How could spatial transformations be played out, how do they sound, what rhythms do they reinforce? What kind of different voices, expressions and collective actions are supported by contemporary architecture and planning? Where do we find interesting thought-provoking social and cultural manifestations? Artists/researchers/architects/planners contributed with different actions, collectively performed during the conference in Stockholm. Each planned action was developed and performed in situ by all the participants. In this collective setting a wide range of methods, theories and tools contributed to our knowledge of how the public space is used and appropriated in daily life.

The actions composing Re(s)on-Art were thus based in site-specific interventions on daily experiences and places; everyday life was at the same time the subject and the raw material of the interventions. The busy square Medborgarplatsen (The Citizen's Place) with its symbolic name in south Stockholm was our main 'playground', as an interesting case of a complex social

and sensorial urban environment inhabited by many different kinds of uses and users. The weather was nice. Each artist or group of artists received one hour on this square, or in some other chosen public place in Stockholm, for the action. After brief instructions every one of the participants took part. Value, meaning and development; those complex issues emerged as direct knowledge through the action itself. In essence each contribution enhanced or questioned elements that were already part of the environment – while being usually ignored due to their common nature: footsteps, corporeal rhythms, flows, resonances, ..., users' ways of inhabiting or crossing a space in general. Some of the actions entailed a hidden or subtle presence in the public space, some others affirmed clearly their visibility (or audibility) in the form of short unexpected events; but all relied on local spatial, sensory or social qualities.

A first hypothesis at the beginning of the Re(s)on-Art conference was that urban complexity calls for collective research, as we had realized already through other public actions organized alongside our research project *Playing the space*. The diversity of methodologies and disciplinary approaches is an answer to the

complexity of urban contexts and ambiances, which require a multiple approach, confronting different perspectives in order to surpass the restrictions of individual disciplines and understanding. Confronting and analyzing methods by sharing them, collectively acting them out and juxtaposing the resulting experiences was thus our working proposal; the outcome of such a multiple approach should help the researcher/artist to realize the limits and pertinence of his or her own as well as other methodologies in practice.

The Re(s)on-Art conference thus offered the context: a complex urban public environment and an open question regarding how to approach daily urban situations and attitudes from an artistic research perspective. The 'audience' was the citizen: the by-passers during the actions. The intention –and general invitation– was not actually to perform, but to provide the conditions for a shared and situated experience of place, in search of an awareness of the daily dialogue with our environments. The built environment influences the citizen's movement and behaviour, and our interventions ask the citizens to inhabit, to leave traces, to walk through public space with open senses.

Some of the actions were almost invisible to the random audience populating the public places in question; no 'extraordinary' presence could be detected, i.e. recognized as a specific artistic action, without paying careful attention. That was the case for the sonic insertion of different virtual water sources resonating the space and local situations (Lares) or, in a similar way, the emergence of Mediterranean summer sounds (electronic cicada droning vibrations) carried by each participant (Andueza/Gil-Fournier). Other actions played with the fragile edge between normal and 'out of the norm', between accepted and rejected behaviours in public spaces, slipping in and out of ordinary situations, appearing and disappearing to distracted observers: the unusual presence of errant bodies among the public in unexpected situations and/or corporal attitudes (Parsberg) or a simultaneous collective reading action composing an urban society of different voices, Poetry Politics, as a reminder of the importance of the forthcoming Swedish general election (Lindh/Sand). Finally, a last group of actions were clearly present, to an extent that some passers-by stopped, observed or even took part in the event: for example the group laying on their back in the middle of the square (Simmar/Berkowicz/Campbell) or the

slow collective walk enhancing a situated and sensorial experience of place (Carles/Palmese), the presence of moving sonic sculptures of open use with a sonic pitch that made the public either curious to play or annoyed (Porcarelli), or the affirmed sonic action of collectively 'drumming' on passers-by's rhythms of steps (Vrhovec). Improvised actions in another square explored the inspiring potential of place and group interaction while creating an improvised carnival as in children's play (Krivtsova /Kremnev).

Nevertheless, this large variety of methods and interventions share a common characteristic: they are in friction with ordinary 'reality', with the daily experience of place. And this expression, 'in friction', must be understood in its double meaning: very close to the daily situations they intervene in, while disrupting them to different degrees. It is this idea of being in friction with daily life that offers us the possibility of an inside and in-depth interaction with and decoding of daily contexts.

During the project and this conference we learned to recognize some of the invisible structures and appropriations of public space; some people spend a large

part of their lives on the street. During the experiments they either expressed clearly that we were invading their territory or offered their help with the actions. While 'playing the public space' social efficiency is questioned and some people found it extremely provocative while others expressed a desire to discuss or to participate. Walking extremely slowly or lying down in the middle of a public square makes us think of the implicit rules of society and invites us to explore playfulness as another social political action.

In the beginning of this article we discussed the evidence of a neutralization of public spaces in contemporary urban planning; neutralization of spaces in terms of absence of human traces, of undesired usages, etc. in favour of clean, safe and secure environments for commercial and touristic activities. And we find in parallel an academia in which words 'reflect' and neutralize the artistic research practice and thus the body of the researcher. Consequently we find a lack of methods able to critically approach the dirty and complex reality – due to the 'invisibility' of the main dominant processes in society, requiring a specific scale and other senses for observation. Neutralization has mostly been approached in research as a necessary

pre-requisite for objectivity as a given for the individual researcher. In this sense there has been, with a few exceptions, a lack of responsible (response-able) answers from academia, whose role – one of the essential ones – is to question given realities, and propose and explore alternatives.

Resonance as an experimental method offers an exploratory answer to such double neutralization, counterpointing dominant discourses in urban planning from a situated experience of place, while providing a collective and social approach to the questions. This corporeal presence and action reveals, from its elementary status, all the contradictions of today's main urban planning and academic logics where daily sensory, spatial and social experience of place has been evacuated. By playing the space, resonance has proved to re-activate public space through simple collective interventions based on everyday life situations, thus serving as a tool for the researchers to engage in a new dialogue with their daily environment while engaging their response-ability as a citizen.

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