

Playing the Space in Re(s)on-Art: a conference in action

Ricardo Atienza and Monica Sand,

ArkDes, Centre for Architecture and Design, Stockholm, Sweden

Ricardo.Atienza@konstfack.se / Monica.Sand@arkdes.se

Playing the Space as an active research method

In this article we present the research project *In situ-action: Resonance, Improvisation, and Variations of Public Space* (Vetenskapsrådet, Swedish Research Council 2011-2014) best known under its operational title *Playing the Space*¹, and the results of the conference Re(s)on-Art, the final phase of this research itinerary. With the invitation to ‘play’ the space, 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. In an extreme worldwide commercialisation 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 *responsibility*; 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, that is, to question the individual, the neutralizing effect of commercialisation, and thus the silenced voices.

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 on-going 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 2014-1, Sand 2014).

¹ playingthespace.wordpress.com

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 on-going communication that takes place between bodies and space; between the audible/visible, past/present, facts/fiction, matter/language (Sand 2012). By composing and recomposing the rhythm and the resonance of daily situations with interruptions and breaks, by instruments and vocal expressions, with transformation of common movements and events “out of place”, new situations have emerged within the existing ones, and established another awareness of urban qualities, limits, forces and meanings.

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. As artists and researchers we are never 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](#), (Sand, Atienza, 2014-2) in which the aim was to collectively experience, question and share urban ambiances 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.

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 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, a conference in action in public space

Instead of trying to build on artistic knowledge and skills, 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 organise an international artistic research conference, *Re(s)on-Art* with actions in public space in September 3-5, 2014 in Stockholm. Remarkably about 25 artists/researchers from ten different countries in Europe, Asia, North and Latin America attended the conference.

Actions & artists

Immigrant Sounds is a participatory exploration of the urban space throughout concepts such as presence, permanence, displacement or settlement. During the performance the participants will freely move in a particular area of the city while carrying a small electronic device that will broadcast a cicada-like sound, characteristic of the sonic environment of southern countries. A set of ideas and questions will be provided to each participant in order to stimulate this specific exploration of the urban social environment.

María Andueza / Abelardo Gil-Fournier
curator, artists and researchers, Madrid

.....
*With the action **Exploring the walk** we intend to reflect upon the walk as a tool to explore the space, at the same time we want to focus on a specific walk and explore critically how we stroll, run, perceive, touch, smell, listen along this path... Our goal is to address our bodily sensations, not only the rational reconstruction of what we perceive, but mainly how our bodies respond. Why do we choose a particular itinerary, walking speed, corporeal posture, a particular relation to the space and other bodies? What if we disrupt traditional ways of walking? If we walk extremely slow? If we lay down on the park? If we hug a tree?...*

José Luis Carles / Cristina Palmese
composer and researcher / architect and researcher. Universidad Autónoma, Madrid / Universidad Politécnica, Madrid

.....

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

Natural Citizenship will play with the body language used in *Natural Horsemanship* and try it out on people in the city. What movements can be used to prevent people walking into you in the streets? How to communicate with the stressed citizens of Stockholm using body language? What would be the new body language that can be used to acknowledge and show respect towards other citizens we share the city with?

Ulrika Jansson artist, Sweden

.....
Making projects for citizens we constantly think about changes: What do we need to change? Where is it possible and where not? Changing people or changing ourselves? Why would people like to join and act? Which instruments and resources do we have? We’ve chosen a spontaneous meeting point for people who live here and perceive the square as a part of their ordinary life or even home, and tourists who are surprised and curious about the space, observe people, take pictures, speak different languages. We propose some kind of chess playing here: every person would have its own move, could be a host and a guest, do some change or observe an always changing situation. By means of body, voice, simple materials we try to create a unique sense of this public place in Stockholm.

Architecture of movement

Yulia Krivtsova / Sergey Kremnev

Performing artists, curators /architect,
Yaroslavl, Russia

.....

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 realised 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 analysing 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

*The informal politics of distribution on the streets makes visible the faults inherent to the European welfare system. At the same time it contributes to the immediate survival of individuals. The workshop *Body on street – kropp på gata* (swedish) – is an ongoing photo-demonstration by and with many. The begging is fairly new entrant into the street space and there are many who do not know how to relate to this, physically and mentally. How does it feel? I experience a distance, almost a chasm between me and those who are begging. Overall, it feels like the street's atmosphere has changed; something has happened in the social climate that feels substantial and yet not defined. Is it solidarity, the ability to be touched? How does it feel for you? Would you like to participate, discuss and make a photo?*

Body on the street

Cecilia Parsberg Umeå Konsthögskola & Konstnärliga Forskarskolan, Malmö/Lund

Essays with sounding fountains
introduces the recorded sound of water fountains into a urban space to simulate temporary water sources. This action explores the sonic and psychological potential of water sounds for transforming the atmosphere of a place by masking specific sounds while introducing new ones into its soundscape.

Guillermo Lares architect and sound-artist, Venezuela / Berlin

pertinence of his or her own as well as other methodologies in practice.

The *Re(s)on-Art* conference thus offered a 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

Bring a fictional text, in any language you like to read in. Alternate reading with strolling, while listening to the others reading. Together we start a poetic process, where voices, movements and associations interweave the public space, even if nobody reads the same text. In this way, we prove the right to make our voices heard in the public space and manifest a Sweden with many different voices, languages and experiences.

Rösträtt/Suffrage

My Lindh / Monica Sand artists / researcher, Sweden

.....

The city is a system of rules, a complexity of common understanding and agreement of what’s allowed and what’s forbidden, a structure with a manual, an environment created to anticipate its inhabitants’, visitors’ and transit passengers’ needs. But what happens if one suddenly feels different, if one has a secret desire for some sort of unconventional experience? What if one feels like doing something that is neither allowed nor forbidden, but probably not expected?

I wanted you to feel the same #1

Pavel Matveyev artist, Sweden / Russia

.....

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 passers-by either playful, curious 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 recognise 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

***Verklärte Stadt** is a non-immersive site-specific installation. Considering the whole perceptual scene as an object, as a malleable material apt for any kind of transformations, in this action the soundscape and its surrounding environment shrink into disfigured elements. Disrupting and manipulating the scale of time and space, the immersive experience of the soundscape is transfigured into a handful of a tangible objects.*

Pablo Padilla architect / artist, London

.....

Can new feelings of access, entitlement, and connection to a space come from the use of sculptural sound devices created for interaction and outdoor places? Are acts of communication, movement and creativity in the production of sound an effective way to connect with others and to challenge, listen and learn from an urban environment? (Defining) social spheres by the placement of a series of sculptural sound objects. The objects aim to create a stage for communication between users as well as integrate their sounds into an urban environment.

Soniferous Mingle

Chris Porcarelli artist, USA-Sweden

.....

that we were invading their territory or offered their help with the actions. While ‘playing the public space’ social efficiency is questioned and some passers-by 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 pointed at evidences of a neutralization of public spaces in contemporary urban planning; neutralization 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

The actions Vigil I and Vigil II (1970s, Polish collective Akademia Ruchu) highlight how urban space can transform a peaceful corporeal expression into something potentially menacing –as if something has or is about to happen. It resonates with the city on two levels; firstly, it disrupts and congests the everyday movement of the city and secondly, it explores the revolutionary potential of simple body positions expressed as a group of people.

Vigil III

Jenny Simmar / Olivia Berkowicz / Joe Campbell Galleri Plywood, Sweden

.....
*The sound intervention **Rhythms of Presence – Heare Drum** focuses its attention on the imperceptible rhythms of everyday walking in public space through attentively listening to and actively engaging with this quotidian activity. The intervention investigates how the activity of walking influences lived experience of a public space and how it manifests presence by focusing solely on the temporalities of rhythms of steps. (...) The step (...) is embodying the relations between the body, a space, the inner mental state and social life, and it is both - an intimate sensation and public manifestation of (self) presence simultaneously. The rhythm of walking therefore influences how one perceives space personally as well as it contributes to forming a sense of a place. It is intimate and public at the same time.*

Tao G. Vrhovec Sambolec Academy of Art and Design in Bergen – KhiB, Norway

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.

Sand, Monica / Atienza, Ricardo (2014) "Playing the space: Resonance, Improvisations and Variations of Urban Ambience", in *Ambiances in action / Ambiances en acte(s) – International Congress on Ambiances, Montreal: Canada*

Sand, Monica / Atienza, Ricardo (2014) "Perspektiv på Levande urban radio (LUR) / Perspectives on Live Urban Radio (LUR)", in Sand (ed.) *Forskning i centrum, Arkitektur- och designcentrum, Stockholm, Suecia.*

Sand, Monica (2014) "Resonans – resonera med stadsrummet", in Olsson, Krister & Nilsson, Daniel (ed) *Det förflutna i framtidens stad. Tankar om kulturarv, konsumtion och hållbar stadsutveckling.* Lund, Suecia; Nordic Academic Press, pp. 37-48

Sand, Monica (2012) "Spegelresa i Spegellandet – reflektionens begärliga och bedrägliga yta", in Arche 40-41, pp. 130-145, Stockholm, Suecia



Fig.1, Row 1: *Immigrant Sounds* by María Andueza and Abelardo Gil-Fournier. Photo: Matti Östling (1-2) Anders Persson (3).

Row 2: *Poetry politics* by My Lindh and Monica Sand. Photo: Matti Östling

Row 3: *Soniferous Mingle* by Chris Porcarelli. Photo: Anders Persson

Row 4: *Exploring the walk* by José Luis Carles and Cristina Palmese. Photo: Ricardo Atienza

Row 5: *Body on the street* by Cecilia Parsberg. Photo: C. Parsberg