

Applause — Experiencing Urban Space

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Biography

Denise Ziegler, born in Switzerland, is a Helsinki-based visual artist and post-doctoral researcher at the Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki. Ziegler's interventional artworks pose questions to public infrastructure, to walls, fences, buildings and pedestrian routes. In a post-beuysian vein, the artist's workshop is extended to public space in order to work with its mechanisms and possibilities.

Abstract

This text investigates how and why artistic research can be understood as experiential research. Bodily experience, perception, imagination, physical artistic practice and writing are described as the tools of artist researchers working with experiences. The artist researcher extends her workspace into urban space in order to ask what it means to experience urban space. What is the impact that urban space can have on its users and vice versa? Artistic research offers distinctive ways to analyse the experience of urban space as a social setting. A significant audio-visual experience in urban space evokes reveries in the form of a fictional event in which the coexistence of man-made structures and elements of nature are essential. Interventional art works serve as test

setups to restage this fictional event into a series of artworks. Thereby, knowledge is gathered of the experience of the self as an urban situation.

Keywords

Experiential research, artistic research practice, bodily experience, imagination, interventional art, experience in urban space

Introduction

In this text I concentrate on an urban setting as the field of making experiences. In urban space the experience and perception it is led and evoked by various manmade constructions such as buildings and streets or social situations like gatherings of people, the ownership of properties or cultivated natural environments. Experiencing urban space means interacting and intervening directly or indirectly, on purpose or unintentionally with other people's actions in the same space. A person moving in urban space is modifying and recreating urban space simply by walking through it. Artist researcher Paul Landon (2019) realized this in the working process for a video work. He feels the need to revitalize a simplified architectonic space through human bodily movements animated in postproduction. Using the rotoscope technique he traces and draws frame by frame back into the video piece the body movements of accidental passers-by which at first, in the simplification, were left out of the original footage. By bringing back human bodily movements (rather than recognizable human figures) into the urban scene he starts to understand bodily movement as an essential part of experiencing an urban situation (Landon, 2019).

In this text I look at experiences of public urban space from the point of view of an artist and through my own artistic practice. I extend my working space into urban space in order to experience the impact it can have on its users. I want to experiment with reactions to it in the

form of interventional artworks that I put into urban space. My question is what does it mean to experience urban space. I try to making available to the audience the potential that resides in experiencing urban space. My hypothesis is that experiencing urban space creates urban space. In my artistic research practice I reinterpret aesthetic experiences significant to me that I have had in urban space by reworking them into a series of artworks. In this connection, I refer to expertise on experience, public space and artistic research such as Longinus' treatise from the period of ancient Greece on how to write a good speech to be held in public (Longinus, 2000), Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's ideas on experience and creativity and the Finnish writer Marja-Liisa Vartio's as well as the philosopher Martin Seel's skill of verbalizing experiences and putting them into social or aesthetic settings.

In order to define the role of an aesthetic experience in the framework of artistic practice and research it is essential to ask what happened in a significant aesthetic experience (Seel, 2013) Already a closer look at a situation or its detailed verbalization can give clues to the nature of the experience at hand. Within the focus of this text is a close look at the nature of an experience in and with urban space. I investigate a (to me) significant experience of a vocal soundscape organized and generated by humans that overlaps with visual events from nearby urban nature. First I will concentrate on a sound experience in public space. Then I define what kind of experience can generate a work of art. Finally, I demonstrate with the process of a series of artworks including Leaf (Ziegler, 2019), Applause (Ziegler, 2019) and Free Hanging Giant Leaf (Ziegler, 2019) the relationship between urban situations and their imaginary features formed in the minds of humans perceiving them.

An echo of excitement

Vocal expression in public space has a long tradition. In a treatise on good writing *On the Sublime* (Peri Hypsous) from the period of ancient Greece, its presumed author Longinus (2000)

gives concrete advice on how to compose a rhetorically good speech. The rhetoric Longinus refer to is closely connected to an actual speech held in a public space. Longinus states that an experience has to be brought forward to the listeners in a way that the audience is under the impression that "... it had itself produced what it just heard" (Longinus, 2000).

Hearing a vocal sound in public space is a unique live situation that can have a strong impact on the audience and lead to a memorable experience. But what actually happens in this experience? In Longinus' example the core or origin of the content of the speech seems to be transferred from the speaker to the listener. What is considered a good speech is presumably one that seems to be made up in the mind of the audience. The experience of something that is made up in the mind might be called a fictional experience. In a similar way as Longinus teaches us to share the inspiration fully with the audience I translate or interpret a sound experience in urban space into a work of art. I transfer what I just heard into my fictional experience. Through artistic practice i.e. in the making of an artwork and through writing about it, I recreate the experience not only in my mind but also as an independent artwork and as a part of my research.

Understanding the concept of experience in this context requires clarification. The term 'experience' is used for quite a wide range of concepts ranging from praxis to knowledge. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe divides experiences into two categories. First, he calls the experience of a lived situation an *Erlebnis* (German for experience). This lived-moment experience can be shared for example in a told anecdote. It can give rise to a story or a discourse but it cannot generate a work of art. In fact, according to Lacoue-Labarthe (1999), *experience* in the sense of a lived moment does not exist at all. Lacoue-Labarthe emphasizes that there exists a kind of experience emerging in "the absence of what is lived" (ibid. p.18). He associates this kind of experience with the German word *Erfahrung*. According to him, *Erfahrung* can give rise to an artwork because it is "precisely that which did not take place" (ibid. p.18). This kind of experience contains things that were not there in the original situation. It is looking for

and moves towards its own origin.” (ibid. p.18). It has nothing to say; Lacoue-Labarthe calls this kind of experience an “echo of excitement”. (ibid. p. 20). In a situation which exceeds our comprehension and where we cannot completely understand what is happening, we might experience a feeling of emptiness or blankness. From the point of view of artistic practice, this dizziness and emptiness can be the starting point for an artwork. From the point of view of a person that is looking at an artwork, confusion or dizziness in a surprising or overwhelming encounter with art is to my mind an essential part of *experiencing* art as something that returns like an echo after the first excitement of the experience has settled.

The notion of an artificial event

In making artworks I translate my experience (*Erfahrung*) of something in a situation, that is not really there, into a work of art. The work is an attempt to empty the situation I came across for example in urban space into imaginative dizziness or nothingness. The nothingness then provides space for taking a different look at the encountered situation and for new thoughts regarding it. In this (experimental) way of working the outcome of the working process can never be foreseen. This procedure can carry the risk of not making any sense at all. Taking a risk again is embedded in the word experience since in its strict sense it is a translation from the Latin *ex-periiri*, meaning crossing through danger (ibid. 1999). In risking “sense” a new understanding– in this case – of urban space may be gained. I will demonstrate this way of working with urban situations with the following example which started with a particular audio-visual experience in urban space.

At the edge of a small forest in the outskirts of the city I filmed leaves of aspen trembling in the wind. Behind my back, next to the forest, there was a football field with a game in progress. The spectators of the game were cheering and applauding. Their sounds were captured on the soundtrack of the video. The situation was hence the following: the shaking leaves of the aspen

trees were pointing away from the woods; they were facing the football field. The handheld camera was turning its back on the events on the football field and did not record any actual visual information from the game. Instead, the sounds of the match were recorded, including the sounds of the audience applauding and shouting. These sounds drowned the sounds created by the aspen leaves.

Aspen trees are known for the sound their leaves make even in the slightest wind. It is therefore quite logical to associate the aspen leaves with sound. The leaves contain a large amount of chalk, which makes them stiff. In the wind the leaves start to swing back and forth and they start to slap against each other. In various sources, this sound is compared to the sound of applauding or the clapping of hands (Koivisto, 1997, Yle Lahti, 2010).

My experience of the event (as the one who held the camera) was the following: While filming I could see the leaves of the trees. They were moving in intervals: sometimes they were more agitated and rocking vividly, and then they calmed down again. At the same time I could hear the different sounds made by the spectators of the football game. They were also sometimes more lively and loud and then again calmer according to the events of the match in progress. The important thing was that I did not actually see the game on the football field.

The two occurrences (the leaves of the aspen trees moving and the spectators of the football match cheering) had similar sequences but they were not in synchrony with each other. By this I mean that while the crowd was cheering loudly the leaves in the trees calmed down and vice versa, and when the leaves were agitated, the spectators of the game were almost quiet. Even though the movement of the leaves did not correspond to the sound that I heard, I still connected in my mind the cheering with the movements of the leaves. It seemed to me, that the trees at the edge of the forest were following the football match and applauding its highlights. In my imagination I connected the cheering sounds of the football spectators with the movements of the leaves of the aspens. In my imagination urban nature joined in to participate in a human



Figure 1. Aspen tree leaves

spectacle (a football match).

Significant in this situation was not connecting the movement of plants with a human event nor the personification of trees in an urban (man-made) setting. Instead I was surprised by the oddity of how I perceived and experienced the situation: a reorganizing of events within a certain timespan took place in mind. What I heard and saw, sounds and visual events, were disconnected from the timeline of consecutive events and they started to reconnect in an alternative way. This experience can be compared to what happens in the editing of a film, where

sound and image, superimposed, can still be edited separately. In my imagination I was putting on hold a sound I just heard for a few seconds, releasing it after a while to match a visual movement that occurred before my eyes. I felt that I was able to “edit” a live situation! The outcome was an artificial event that was triggered and fed by the sounds and moving images of a live situation. I understand artificial here as “made by a human” perceived from my perspective as a human. In the situation at hand it was precisely “. . . that which did not take place, that did not happen or occur during the singular event” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1999) that I wanted to work with. In my artistic practice it is mostly extraordinary notions of reality of this kind that mark for me the starting point of an artwork. I consider the notion of an artificial event a significant aesthetic experience.

The fictional nature of urban events or: an unknown way of perceiving

The situation (of me filming the leaves of the trees and connecting their movements to human sounds from a nearby football field) contains a perceptual mismatch. This mismatch or occurring error was “corrected” in my mind. I was twisting the interpretation of my perception into a fictional or imaginary event in which unconnected, unsynchronized occurrences formed a coherent yet logically impossible situation. In my imagination I filled in a perceptual time gap. This opened up a new dimension of the perception of the Now. The Now did not only expand by including the near past and the near future (Morley, 2010) but gave me the possibility to edit a live situation into a fictional i.e. non-happening event. I understand the experience of a fictional event here as something that is filtered through certain memories and expectations and through this filtration it renders to something that is invented, “made up” in the mind of the beholder to become what it is now. In my artistic practice I want to encourage the viewer to note and appreciate a possible fictional nature of approach to experiencing urban space.

In order to find out more about the event at the edge of the woods I looked again at the first

assumption I made in the situation. The assumption was that I was not personifying trees when I connected the movements of their leaves with the applause of spectators at a football match. I also wanted to investigate and exclude other possible relations between myself and the trees. In the situation at hand I was to my mind also not assimilating with trees by trying to become one nor was I entering a dialogue or collaboration with trees. Instead, I simply wondered how the trees might experience the situation and translate this experience into a human experience. I like to elaborate on two examples what I mean by “assimilation” with trees and “collaboration with” non-human creatures.

First an example of assimilation of humans to leaving things around them is described in Marja-Liisa Vartio’s novel *The Parson’s Widow* (1967). In the novel the widow of a Lutheran pastor is wondering how she would fit into her late husband’s collection of stuffed birds. She speculates where she would be placed among the other birds on top of a cabinet in order to form a lifelike site according to the habits of live birds in their natural surroundings. She asks herself in what pose she would be stuffed to achieve a most birdlike habitus (Bourdieu, 1998). Her hatred of the hobby of her late husband, which was more important to him than his relationship with his wife, leads to her very ambiguous and close connection with these objects and former living creatures. In her obsession, the widow gets closer to behaving like a bird and eventually assimilates completely with these animals. The culmination of her madness is a detailed description of how different witnesses remember the sounds that her servant made while imitating on her orders the mating call of a wood grouse. (Vartio, 1967) The obsession with birds leads to the parson’s widow’s severe mental illness. In Vartio’s novel the identification with other creatures than humans (birds) fills the gap of a unfulfilling relationship between humans. In this novel from the 1960s, the plot can only result in the mental illness of the leading character. In our days in the 2020s there might have been alternative conclusions. To step down from the human pedestal as the crown of creation and to take one’s place in the line of things and

creatures could be considered even a trendy holistic way of reacting to interpersonal and social problems.

I excluded for my investigations also the collaborative nature of my relationship with the applauding Aspen trees. A good example of a collaborative practice with plants is given by performance artist and researcher Annette Arlander. She enters into a dialogue with trees for example in her work *Performing with Plants* (2017) She states that “by sitting in trees, or on tree stumps, I tried to explore how a ‘being with’ or ‘becoming with’, beyond language could visually take place.” For her “... performing or appearing with elms and alder trees could be understood as an artistic collaboration with them ”.(Arlander, 2017)

Instead of assimilating with trees or to collaborate with them I try to look at the urban surrounding from an (in my mind) imagined perspective of an fictive event. In the situation of the aspen trees applauding the football match I myself encountered an unknown way of perceiving and reacting to urban events. My intention was to translate this unknown way of perceiving into a work of art, i.e. into a humanly known way of perception, or at least to build through the artwork a relation with this unknown way of perceiving and experiencing. The goal was hence to understand experiences in urban situations as complex social settings.

Reflecting human experience

I experienced the live, edited, imaginary event that was triggered by the sound and image of a “real” situation like a prototype, a source or a first model of something that I start to work with. At the same time, this experience contains already everything that I want to incorporate into the artwork, namely the communication of a perplexing experience in urban space. The prototype is introduced here as a metaphor for something that already exists and is in use but we have not yet noticed that it has an imminent potential feature pointing to a different use or understanding than it has had until now.¹ Unlike a prototype that aims at being developed

into a product , I understand the ongoing prototype in urban encounters as the potential in an everyday situation. It is something ongoing that has already been there for a long time but is still unknown. We could call this unknown potential “something in development”. It is waiting for the moment to surface, waiting to be thought of and to be worked into a piece of art (Heidegger, 1960/2003). The artwork’s origin is in the action of making visible and, to be more specific, in the continuity of the action of making it visible (Heidegger, 1960/2003). Prototypical features of urban situations can be revealed and communicated through the bodily experience of the artist researcher and in artistic practice.

In artistic practice there are many ways to go about communicating experiences in urban surroundings, i.e. how to develop an artwork that originates from an experience in urban surroundings. For example, the photographer Richard Wentworth states in an interview where he refers to urban conversations between people and objects: “The last thing I would want to do is to go to my studio and mimic, or muck up, or re-engineer an event” (Borden et al., 2002). This is exactly what I liked to do in order to find out more about the situation at hand. I wanted to manifest the experience that was significant to me by interpreting the situation into a work of art. I wanted to look at the situation of the aspen trees applauding the football match from the point of view of an artificial event. By that I mean a nature event such as leaves moving in a tree can gradually transform into an event that, from a human perspective, relates to man-made structures and happenings and our memories of them. And by doing so, nature in urban surroundings can be seen as a prototype of events that reflect human experiences in their relation to man-made structures.

A voice for the invisible: tree talk translation

I decided to reconstruct my experience in this situation in the form of a short experimental video. In order to create a possible sound for the footage of the agitated leaves I edited the

existing soundtrack of the applauding football fans to fit the movements of the leaves. I doubled, repeated and layered samples of the existing soundtrack onto a new soundtrack. In the video you see in turns the leaves moving fast while hearing loud sounds of cheering and then you see the movement of the leaves calming down at the same time as you here only moderate sounds coming from the football field. I never published the video but you can imagine it. Instead ,you may listen to the soundtrack of the aspen tree leaves video piece. And I will tell you, what I thought would be the result of the video.



Applause (Ziegler 2019) sound track. Click image to start the soundtrack (1 min).

Before editing the video, I thought that the outcome would be that the leaves would acquire “human voices” of a kind . In a similar way as dogs talk in comedy movies or apples talking in children stories (The apple cries in Mother Holle: "Oh, shake me, shake me, we apples are all of us ripe!") (Grimm, 1962). I wondered if it would be worthwhile doing the video editing at all since the personification of trees was never really part of my original experience in the situation and I had excluded this possible interpretation right from the start. I prepared the video anyway.

While watching the completed video I noticed to my surprise that in my thoughts and remarks about the whole situation I had neglected one component almost completely — the wind! While watching the video I noticed that instead of the leaves gaining anthropomorphic features, the soundtrack gave a kind of “voice” to something that was not visible at all. This invisible thing was the wind that moved the leaves! It seemed like the wind would applaud because of the joy of being able to set in motion and orchestrate the movements of aspen leaves. It looked like the wind was applauding while agitating and shaking the leaves. This gave me the next concrete clue of how to continue working with the experience at hand.

Aspen leaves are passive but have stiff stems, which are attached at a 90-degree angle to flat stiff leaves. These leaves do not slump at all. They bear themselves well while swinging back and forth (Koivisto, 1997). The passivity and the sensitive reaction to wind is the starting point of my next experimental test setup. In a second attempt to reconstruct the situation of aspen tree leaves moving in the wind, I built a sculptural device. The device holds the human body in a tilted position and makes it possible to let the arms hang freely. Onto the freely hanging arm a light, flat and round object was attached in order to augment the surface of the arm and to simulate the proportions of a giant leaf. The giant leaf was made out white cellular board and tape. The device with a human wearing the leaf was placed in a windy location. In the test situation the wind moved the arm with the artificial leaf only slightly. The shoulder joint of a human is by far not as flexible as the stem of a leaf attached to a branch. In order to get the

arm-leaf moving more, the wind should be much stronger or the leaf should have a much larger surface area. This again would exert much more force on the freely suspended arm and the test person would risk dislocating her shoulder. Nonetheless, the test situation gave the possibility to feel waiting for the next gust of the wind, with the arm hanging there with no other intention than to be ready to react to what will happen.²



Figure 2–3. Denise Ziegler, Leaf, 2018. Wood cellular board, The sculptural device here is part of a gallery exhibition

So far, an experience in urban space had through imagination caused a fictional event – one could call this a reverie (Borden, 2002) – and it had aroused the curiosity to find out more about the potential of fictional events of this kind . In my investigations I expanded the concept of conversation between people and objects (Borden, 2002) to a conversation between different events in public space. In urban space there are events organized by humans, like for example a sports event, and events that have their cause in non-human initiated activities, such as the wind blowing. In the situation at the edge of the forest an overlapping of different kinds of events took place: an event of nature overlapped with a human activity. Both were evolving simultaneously in urban space and they were sharing the same soundscape.

In both events there was an active and a passive component. The wind and the football

players are the active components. The wind blows and moves objects, the players run, kick and defend the ball. The leaves and the spectators of the football match on the other hand are “moved” by an agitator from outside. They are the “passive” component of the event. The audience “moved” by the events on the football field is in a similar way “passive” as the leaves of a tree are moved by the wind. “Passivity” is here not a value statement. It simply refers to the reactive nature of the movements or sounds that involved. In their behaviour the spectators of a sporting event and the leaves of a tree pass on or transmit information about the nature of the event in question. In spectator sports, showing compassion and devotion to an external event by making sounds is a way of transmitting the essence of, for example, a football match in progress. Leaves moving in a tree again pass on information about weather conditions i.e. how strong the wind is at that particular moment. This information is quite important since wind is only visible and audible through the objects it moves and the sound that it makes. The next and last test setup was to let the giant leaf hang freely from a ladder and to observe what it does to the surroundings.

The giant leaf made a lot of noise by banging on the ladder. Due to its movements in the wind it looked like a real leaf even though it was a very poor copy of one, though a leaf would never rotate 360 degrees without getting detached from the tree like we can see it in the video. Finally, towards the end of the video, the movements of the giant leaf tempted a juvenile to engage in a boxing match with it. In its enlarged scale and through the loud and persistent banging sound the big leaf became a provocative opponent.

Concluding remarks

In artistic research practice, experience is the key source not only for the enjoyment of art but also for the artistic working process. Experience is hence a decisive source also for making an artwork (Heidegger, 1960/2003). In this text I investigated how and why artistic research



Figure 4–5. Still images from the video *Free Hanging Giant Leaf*, (Ziegler 2019). Click images to start the video (1:22). <https://youtu.be/5Z9xdxCvCuk>

practice can be understood as experiential research. As an artist researcher I have the advantage of working in a professional way with my own bodily experience. In this context it is essential to understand that this bodily experience of an artist researcher is not an exclusively subjective construct – in which case no one else could take part in its reception or no one could disagree with its content (Seel, 2013). The experience with which an artist researcher works has to be of an intersubjective accessible nature and it has in that sense an objective character. At the same time, it is important to understand that artistic practice can never be strictly objective. Instead, it can bring forth a wide potential of sentiment, sometimes even an ecstatic or extraordinary aesthetic experience. The understanding of an artwork is embedded in this potential; it calls for the notion of the experience that it enables (Seel, 2013).

In order to experience we depend our body and its senses. This dependence on the physical body and its apparatus of perception (senses) not only renders our experience to be part of the humankind but also emphasizes the physical singularity and physically subjective nature of our

experiences. For example, the visual perception and experience of spatial depth depends on our stereoscopic vision. Artist researcher Tuula Närhinen (2018) describes the experience of depth as something that affects us in two directions: stereo vision gives us the impression of depth in surrounding space and through this we experience at the same time the dimensions of our own body in that space. Impaired eyesight, for instance, influences the experience not only of surrounding space but also the experience of the self in the surroundings (Närhinen, 2018). This means that surrounding space constantly contributes to the definition of the self and vice-versa.

Artistic research practice that includes an experimental approach and artworks as a part of the research can bring the audience in the realm of significant experiences. Artist researcher uses their professional personal bodily experience and artistic practice to bring forth these experiences. Through reworking and restaging a significant experience in urban space into an artwork the experience can be traced back to future perceivers. By way of that artistic research offers a distinctive way to analyse urban situations and the experience of urban space as social settings. In taking a closer look at experiences generated in and with public urban space we put our body and its movements into an active relation with the surrounding space and become increasingly aware of the influence we actually can have on it simply by moving through it. Experiences in urban space can have imaginary features formed in the minds of humans perceiving them. In these imaginary events sound plays an influential role. Audio and visual perceptions can overlap in non-linear ways forming soundscape reveries. Urban reveries are an essential part of public space. They make it possible to *imagine* of what future situation the current encounter in urban space could be the starting point.

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Notes

¹The independent artist and researcher group (Heikkinen, Kaverma, Ziegler) has been working since 2017 with the “Continuous Prototype” -method that describes the experiencing of making and communicating artworks. In the works to be developed the group is testing of what kind of future situation the present encountered situation could be a prototype. Prototype thinking turns upside down along the timeline. An existing situation provides clues to what possible future situation could be considered the starting point or prototype. In this setup, the artwork reveals the prototypical potential of what already exists. (Heikkinen, Kaverma, Ziegler, 2018)

² This kind of receptive device could be an addition to public gyms in parks where the wind experience device could complement physical exercise devices. One could experience there urban situations like wind-in-objects or wind-in-your-body.