

Unfolding Spaces of My Memory: Female Migration through Audio

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Abstract

This article focuses on the possibilities of using the audio walk as a method for artistic research. First, the decisive characteristics of the format will be outlined, followed by a detailed description of an example case: my artistic research project that focuses on the subject of female migration. Several elements of the audio walk were used in a series of exercises with a group of recently migrated women, with the intention of investigating how the perception of the city is determined by their specific experience. This example case will be used as a means of pointing out several possibilities and opening up a space to think of the audio walk as a way of presenting a work but also as a way of generating knowledge as well.

Keywords: Audio walk, perception, walking, artistic research, gender, migration, sound art

Introduction

While walking down the streets of any given city, all of our senses collaborate in order to produce our perception as a whole. Additionally, this perception is influenced by our past experiences: Setting the body in motion through space, we gain access to our memories and past sensations. Therefore, taking a walk is simultaneously a way to create and a way to access a type of knowledge that has been stored not only in the invisible confines of the mind, but also in the materiality of the body. Experience and memory are thus also forms of embodied knowledge.

As an artist, I am interested in gaining access to this embodied type of knowledge by using the audio walk as an artistic strategy and creating mediated situations that operate at the intersection of the body's subjectivity and its surroundings. In the audio walk, narrating voices, field recordings, music and sound effects are combined to an audio piece especially created for a certain site – or a type of location. The location is not understood as one fixed point but rather as a series of points connected to each other by a line that must be traversed. Portable media players and headphones enable a mobile reception throughout the walk. While the other senses are not interfered with, an additional layer of privatized sound is added to the ears. The participant's movements are then synchronized with the environment by instructions or a rhythm defined in the audio track.

It is precisely the correspondence between the person, the content of the audio and the location that creates an impacting experience for the participant of the audio walk. First evoking images in the participant's imagination and then directing the attention to the surrounding, the experience is marked by the contrasting use of impulses that intensify introspective and extroverted forms of engagement with the work. This is precisely where I recognize this artistic format's potential as a method for artistic research. In addition to posing the questions common to many audio walks: 'What are the qualities and specific aspects of this space? What narratives are possible and intrinsic to it?' I want to ask: 'Who is this person and how does she experience the world around her? How do her prior experiences influence the perception of her surroundings and how is this manifested?'

This article focuses on the possibilities of using the audio walk as a method for artistic research. First, the decisive characteristics of the format will be outlined, followed by a detailed description of an example case: my artistic research project that focuses on the subject of female migration. Several elements of the audio walk were used in a series of exercises with a group of recently migrated women, with the intention of investigating how the perception of the city is determined by their specific experience. This example case will be used as a means of pointing out several possibilities

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1. Audio Walks: A Mobile Strategy to Reveal, Overwrite and Interact

In her article “Mediated Listening Paths: Breaking the Auditory Bubble” Elena Biserna describes three tactics commonly used by artists working with sound- and audio walks to engage in a relationship between participant and environment through a mediated experience: revealing, overwriting and interacting.

The works coined under the term “revealing” have a quality of evoking attributes- such as sounds, rhythms and noises - that are inherent to a space and yet faint or hidden, while the focus of the projects that run under the term “interacting” is the performance made visible in urban space by the actions of the participants themselves. The third tactic of overwriting adds an artificial layer of experienced reality:

“Many projects overwrite the environment by superimposing a narrative acoustic time-space over the physical one. By doing so, they “dramatize” everyday reality immersing the walker in urban adventures, in cinematic experiences on the move, or in a multiplicity of stories, testimonials and interpersonal traces (...) returning a fragmented and manifold “image” of the city.”¹

The projects described by Biserna contain a narrative that is often closed in itself, using the audio walk as a format to “present” it to an audience. A narrating voice that addresses the participants individually is a common element within these works, but the questions posed do not call for an answer. Mostly, the para-social interaction ² is used to trigger the imagination, activating an introspective process and therefore immersing the participant even deeper into the experience. The feeling of closeness and intimacy is created only to intensify the illusion of physical cinema. Thus, the format is mostly unidirectional – it regards the individual as a physically involved spectator-participant, a receptacle for the artistic production.

1.1. Research Method: Audio Walks as a Way of Knowing and Showing

Dwight Conquergood suggests that we can think of perfor-

mance along three “crisscrossing lines of activity and analysis”³. In this sense, performance can be perceived:

- (1) As a work of imagination
- (2) As a pragmatics of inquiry
- (3) As a tactics of intervention

In my practical-based research project, I intend to draw together precisely these three points: Create audio walks and experiments (1) as a means of reflecting upon (2) and revealing (3) the specific quality of the female migrants’ perception of the city upon arrival. Using audio walk as my research method, I combine the techniques of walking through a specific environment while listening to a pre-produced or pre-recorded audio piece over headphones as a means of emphasizing the subjectivity of this relational experience that is both embodied and situated.

Rather than “solely” showing an art work that is meant to be experienced by physically engaging with it, I am interested in the knowledge that can be generated in and through it. Instead of giving answers, directions and instructions, the audio walk can also question and reflect on the experience in itself. The narrating voice can be introduced as a facilitator, an interviewer almost, while the “soundtrack to reality”⁴ can be utilized as a possibility of creating contrasting situations, opposing the original soundscape. Furthermore, by opening up a space for discussion and analysis of the work, a bidirectional process is set off that sheds a light on the thoughts and questions that were provoked.

1.2. Migration as an Embodied Experience

In her book “Strange Encounters: Embodied others in Post-Coloniality” Sara Ahmed describes the experience of inhabiting a particular space as an embodied one:

“The immersion of a self in a locality is not simply about inhabiting an already constituted space (from which one could depart and remain the same). Rather, the locality intrudes into the senses: it defines what one smells, hears, touches, feels, remembers. The lived experience of being-at-home hence involves the enveloping of subjects in a space which is not simply outside them: being-at-home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, inhabit each other.”⁵

According to the author, the sensorial perception of a loca-

tion forms a unit that is wrapped around the subject like a second, permeable skin. In a similar way, the audio enters - intrudes - the body through the ears and the “auditory bubble”, created by sound listened to over headphones, similarly envelopes the body. Just as the second skin described by Ahmed, the audio is layered over the sounds of the environment. Precisely by operating at this intersection between body and location, the audio functions as mediator and enquires on how these two elements impact and re-inhabit each other.

Especially during a period of transition, in which the new location is still unexplored and unfamiliar to the immigrant, this second skin does not feel quite that comfortable yet, it expands and contracts in a process that Ahmed describes as the irritation of an itch⁶. The impressions of the location one previously recognized as the place of being-at-home are still very present, so that the physical sense of moving through space is enough to trigger a memory of another place. This is also what motivated me to work with a group of women that had recently arrived to live in a new country. I was interested in exploring the “discomfort” felt on the level of the second skin as a very productive moment of self-awareness and instability. For this purpose, I appropriated Ahmed’s questions into my artistic research: How do bodies re-inhabit space? And how do spaces re-inhabit bodies?

1.3. Gender and Migration

Both the research areas of feminist geography and that of feminist migration studies deal with the subject of women’s subjugation to patriarchal limitations on the self, which often include the restriction of women’s mobility in the city. These study areas have made it their pursuit to identify and expose the power relations embedded in, shaped through, and reinforced by migrants’ bodies in particular places and across space⁷. Space and place are described as being gendered and sexed, and gender relations and sexuality in turn as ‘spaced’⁸. The experience of migration is thus embodied and gendered as well.

“In transnational contexts, the most financially and politically powerful migrants tend to be either explicitly or implicitly masculinized, such that in the literature on transnationalism, women are alternatively taken to be truants from globalized economic webs, stereotyped as subservient or victimized, or relegated to playing supporting roles, usually in the domestic sphere.”⁹

Through my artistic research, I intend to investigate and revert this image by working with a group of female migrants in public space, taking them beyond the places usually circumscribed as the domain of female action. By making them the main protagonists and direct collaborators of my experiments, I also want to portray women that present a different kind of power than the one usually attributed to women in the context of migration – independent, autonomous and engaged with the world and surroundings.

2. Artistic Research: Exercises

2.1. The Participants

After defining that I would work with a group of women that had recently arrived to live in the city of Cologne on their own, a short call was written and sent out. The only pre-requisites posed were that their arrival date in Germany should not exceed six months and that they would be comfortable to communicate in English.

A group formed after a month, consisting of 13 women. Their ages ranging between 20 and 35 years, the biggest percentage was from Spain, two women from China, and one respectively from Italy, Georgia, Mexico and Australia. At that time, none of them knew how long they would be staying in Germany. The main motivating factors that drove the women to answer to the call were curiosity, the possibility of sharing their own experiences with others and a personal interest in the subject of migration. And precisely this open, explorative spirit marked our meetings and the exchange between the different participants.

Setup and Structure of the Exercises

As a basis for the exercises, I established three different fields of action that would be approached consecutively:

- 1) Sensitize and enhance the (aural) perception of the city
- 2) Evoke personal memories of other places and past experiences
- 3) Connect experiences of the present (here and now) with the past (then and there)

The exercises were conducted using a series of tools: bin-aural microphones, audio recording devices (digital and analogue), headphones, maps and portable media players

that were prepared especially for each experiment they were used in. This allowed me a freedom and spontaneity to respond to the impulses provided by the participants. Also, I have been working with my own voice for some time now, using it as a means to connect with the audience. This was also a recurrent element in the exercises, especially in the audio pieces that I created for the proposed situations.

Seeking a more reduced and minimalistic approach to the exercises, a special attention was given to the rigor of their concept and content, as well as to the script.

2.2. Exercises

2.2.1. Sensitizing and enhancing one's perception of the surrounding

The first meeting of the group was focused on exercises to sensitize and enhance the women's attention to their surroundings, with a special emphasis on the city's soundscape and walking through a neighborhood they had never been to.

First, we went out for a silent walk in the neighborhood. This exercise was carried out with the intention of sensitizing the participants towards their auditory perception of the environment.

The second exercise involved listening to several recordings indoors: field recordings of certain locations throughout the city. They listened to all of the tracks over the course of an hour, some of which had been made with binaural microphones¹⁰ while walking through a location and others were static recordings of a certain spot on a site.

We had a group discussion directly after both experiences. For many of the women, to listen with great attention while walking through the neighborhood posed a new and entirely different concept. Later, they reported a shift in attention during routine daily actions, in which they seemed to notice the sounds that surrounded them more actively and with curiosity.

The reactions to the second part of the experiment were varied, depending on how much of the city the participants already knew. If the soundscapes could not be attributed to a specific site, they would evoke very lively images of places and situations that they knew from the past - As if completing the soundscape through images drawn from memories of other places that could just as well correspond to these

sounds.

This last aspect seemed of great interest to me, since audio walks often work the other way around: The audio on the headphones adds a separate layer that enhances and complements the currently experienced environment. So the current perception as a whole is "augmented" through the artificial sounds and the imagination is projected onto the surroundings, transforming it for the audio walk participant. But what if the sounds do not correspond to the currently experienced environment? What if they negate and contradict the current perception, creating a productive tension in the spectator-participant? These questions led me to develop the second set of experiments using the method of translocation.

2.2.2. Translocations or Exercises in Schizophrenia

The term schizophonia was coined by R. Murray Schafer¹¹ to describe a state in which what the person hears doesn't correspond to what she is perceiving with the other senses, creating a disruption, a feeling that something is "off" and that the senses cannot be trusted anymore. Even though this is a rather familiar phenomenon in most parts of western culture, where it is common to listen to music on portable devices while being anywhere, the music can also be substituted with binaural recordings of a different space, creating a completely different experience.

Night Walk in the Park

The exercise within the second category turned out to be a less pleasant experience for some of the participants. A route was chosen inside a park in Cologne and I recorded a walk I took during the day using binaural microphones. You could hear many people interacting and a lot of movement through the environment: children, adults, dogs and bicycles.

We met in front of the park at night. The track recorded during the day was given to them with no further instruction other than the route and the affirmation that the park was safe – as I knew both from extensive self-experience and research. Equipped with headphones and a portable device, the women started walking with a distance of one minute set apart from each other. The 15 minute long route took them through parts of the urban park that were dark and others that were well lit.

After they returned, the reactions differed a lot from each other: While most of them seemed relieved that the tour was over, some were more relaxed than others. One woman's reaction stood out among all of them. She was infuriated and immediately proceeded to describe her experience and explain the reasons for her reaction: During the first months of 2015 there had been a high number of attacks on women in Australia, her country of origin. A few of the murdered women had been found in parks. These informations were very present in her mind at the moment she entered the park for the exercise. The next 15 minutes were then a torturous experience to her, since all of the sounds from the recorded track that appeared to originate around her seemed threatening.

Not being able to trust her senses, she felt both terrorized and helpless. The auditive sense, which would otherwise help her in the dark and unfamiliar environment, was now "obstructed" by the headphones. Her memory was filled with gruesome images and details from the news that influenced her imagination and resulted in the feeling of extreme discomfort while being in the park at night. A child's name being called out by the father would have been an unremarkable situation in the park during the day, but in the dark environment, it became a somewhat ghostly presence filled with the threat of imminent tragedy.

Both she and others stressed the fact that they felt very disoriented and at times "as if going mad". When I introduced the term "schizophonia" at the end of our discussion, they could relate very well to the term and stated that they had felt exactly that: a disconnection between the direct experience and the auditive sense, which was aggravated by the darkness.

In retrospect, it would have been easy to guess the impact of the experiment in the park beforehand. But at the same time, it was very interesting to observe that specific knowledge and the emotional connection to the country of origin could make the experience differ so much. In contrast to all the others, the Australian participant was much more sensitive and vulnerable towards the experience. Her subjective, individual experience was strongly influenced by the empathy and fears that were currently being projected in her home country. Maybe the fact that she lives in Germany stressed

these facts even more, since loved ones could potentially fall victim to these crimes while she was away.

In the park, the harmless sounds of human interaction acquire a sombre tone when played back at the same location at night. Apart from the schizophonic quality of the experience, the darkness brings out many components intrinsic to the space and triggers the imagination, which is strongly connected to individual experiences. By choosing a location associated with a current wave of crime in a specific country made the international context of this group and its local differences more explicit.

2.2.3. Disappearing Act: An Audio Walk for airports

Within the last "category" of experiments, I developed an audio walk for the space in which most of the women had first arrived to live in the city of Cologne: the airport. As the non-place¹² par excellence, this space intrigued me by its ability to appear so sterile and impersonal and yet to be connected to people's personal lives and therefore holding a strong emotional value to many.

I created an alternative map to the airport based on its original, in which I named the different spaces according to the human activities taking place in it. As a next step, an audio piece was created for each area. In the tracks, I mixed voice recordings with music and sound effects. The audio had a high level of self-referentiality: Many questions regarding their own experience of migration and travel were included, as well as a philosophical and metaphoric description of the areas and their specific functionality. A few autobiographical elements were added as well, an intersection between their and my own experience of migration.

Though we arrived at the airport as a group, each participant took the audio walk by herself, the tracks had a different order for each one of them. During the 20 minutes, they walked from one section of the airport to the next while listening to the audio tracks over their headphones.

To return to this space with the sole purpose of exploring it, gave them the room to unfold the spaces of their memory. While walking, observing, thinking, the experience of remembering became an embodied one. The site-specific audio tracks used at each location intensified the experience even more. While the other senses were kept "unobstructed", the

auditive one directed both their gaze, pace and thought in a most subtle way. It revealed integral qualities of the location and brought them together with the personal, subjective experience of the participants. The audio walk intensified a process that could be called “embodied remembering”.

After the walk had ended, we met again for a group discussion that revealed that both the audio walk and the memories left a strong impression on all of the participants. Very quickly, the conversations became more and more about the personal experience of migration and the pleasures, challenges and uncertainties connected to it. The discussion gave them the opportunity to share their thoughts with people that have gone through a comparable experience and to discover the differences and many similarities.

2.2.4. Soundscape of Treasured Memories

As a second experiment within this third category, I asked each one of the women what sounds or soundscapes have an emotional connection to their hometown and/ or family and friends. The idea behind this was to create a bridge between the present yet unfamiliar city and the familiar yet absent sounds of the past by adding the latter to the first on the acoustic level, while walking through an unfamiliar environment. I created a soundscape collaging the situations they had described and they listened to it subsequently while walking through the streets of the city of Cologne.

Collected list of sounds and soundscapes:

1. Signal horns of cars.
2. Twittering of the swallows in the spring as they return back from the south.
3. The sound of “Dulzaina” it a typical wind instrument.
4. The sound of a high-pitched female voice speaking loudly, reminds me a lot my mother.
5. Background noise of a distant sports field with shouts and cheers, cars driving slowly by.
6. The noise of lots of people talking, drinking coffee etc in a shopping centre.
7. The sound of the ocean and the waves.
8. It's the wind, the dog barking, meowing cats and rooster kikiriki in the early morning.

...

But the result was quite contrary to what I had expected. To them, it was difficult to relate the sounds and the envi-

ronment through which they walked. And instead of evoking memories and emotions, the memory most present to them was that of when they had thought about and informed me of the sounds. Listening to the soundscape became a game of recognizing “their” chosen sounds and verifying my attempt of sonically representing their description. So the memory was overwritten or complemented by the newer information created within the project in itself. As a form of palimpsest, the newer set of memories had overwritten the older ones.

And this is also how many of the exercises worked: The memories evoked during the experiments were also complemented by the memory of the experience in itself, as in a process of constant writing and re-writing of the space. Precisely this idea is one important realization that came through this series of experiments: Both memory and the experience of a space – being it on the auditory level or as a whole – are extremely subjective and malleable, changing quickly over time.

3. Conclusion

Returning to the analogy of the environment as a second skin, and to the idea of the second skin of a migrant “not fitting properly” (of it being too tight or uncomfortable and creating an itch), my goal was to constructively work with what is stirred up during this specific period of time in the life of the migrants and inquire: How does this process express itself in their perception and how do present and past experiences of spaces impregnate each other?

Developing and undertaking the exercises was a productive way of learning about the subjective perception of the spaces that currently surround this group of women. Through this, I was also able to understand how spaces can have a different impact on different people. But the most interesting part was, to me, that this knowledge was first accessed on an embodied level before turning into cognitive, intellectual facts. And to be able to weave in my artistic skills into a series of exercises that are of artistic value – as performances - and simultaneously creating something that goes beyond the aesthetic experience of an art work.

The exercises that I carried out represent only a fraction of how audio walks can be used as a method of artistic research. Both the arts and other fields – geography, architecture and social sciences for example – can profit from

the possibilities that this mediated experience can provide. Walking and listening become a performative way of exploration of the environment and especially of investigating the relationship/ perception/ reaction of the person participating in it, achieving an embodied type of knowledge instead of a solely intellectual one.

Repeating Sara Ahmed's words, space and subject leak into each other, inhabit each other. The same is true with the audio: it permeates the body and environment, flows from one into the other seamlessly. It can enhance the multi-sensory experience of the subject moving through a specific surrounding by amplifying and/or overlaying the local soundscape with different sounds. Or even create an irritation by replacing it with an apparently incongruous soundscape.

It is possible to use music, field recordings, narrating voices and sound effects in a great variety of combinations and with the aim of addressing an endless number of topics. Especially when combined with the subjective perception of a human being, the audio walk presents the opportunity to trigger and to intensify the process of experiencing and remembering while walking through a specific space.

For as Eirini Nedelkopoulou states on audio walks: "(...) *the spectatorial body is the very medium whereby the mixed-media world comes to completion.*"¹³ So why not use this mixed-media world as a way of accessing information on the subject inhabiting both this body and the world?

Notes

1 - Biserna, E. (2015). "Mediated Listening Paths: Breaking the Auditory Bubble." *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media* 9(2).

2 - Horton, D. a. W., R. (1956). "Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance." *Psychiatry* 19: 215-229.

3 - Conquergood, D. (2002). "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research." *The Drama Review* 46(2): 145-156.

4 - The term was coined by Walther Siegfried in the title of some of his works.

5 - Ahmed, S. (2000). *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London, Taylor & Francis.

6 - *ibid.*

7 - Silvey, R. (2008). *Borders, Embodiment, and Mobility: Feminist Migration Studies in Geography. A Companion to Feminist Geography*. J. S. Lise Nelson, John Wiley and Sons.

8 - McDowell, L. (1999). *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. Minneapolis, Wiley. Page 85.

9 - Pratt, G. a. Y., B. (2003). "Transnational (counter) topographies." *Gender, Place and Culture* 10(2): 159-166.

10 - Binaural recording is a method in which two microphones are used to achieve a 3-d stereo sound sensation for the listener. It is intended to be replayed using headphones and will not translate well over stereo speakers.

11 - Schafer, R. M. (1969). *The new soundscape: a handbook for the modern music teacher*, BMI Canada.

12 - As coined by Marc Augé in: *Non-Lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*. Le Seuil, Paris 1992.

13 - Nedelkopoulou, E. (2011). "Walking Out on Our Bodies Participation as ecstasis in Janet Cardiff's Walks." *Performance Research* 16(4): 117-123. Page 122.

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Nedelkopoulou, E. (2011). "Walking Out on Our Bodies Participation as ecstasis in Janet Cardiff's Walks." *Performance Research* 16(4): 117-123.

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