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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the audio walk as an experimental mobile method for artistic research. Instead of regarding the art form as a finished product that must be received in a specific way, I propose to utilize it as a tool: a mediated voice accompanies the participant on his or her way in order to direct the attention towards specific events and aspects concerned with the person's relationship to the environment.

In the 'walk-along', a mobile method used and described by Margarethe Kusenbach, a fieldworker accompanies the interviewed subject on a daily route, enquiring on the same or similar topics as described above. Due to the parallels between this method and the idea that I propose, it seems fitting to compare the two. In doing so, further insight can be obtained on how the audio walk might work as an experimental mobile method. Though the voice recording assumes a function that is comparable to the physically present interviewer, it also provides a space in which the participant can deepen her or his involvement with the environment.

Mobile listening and the Audio Walk

One distinctive aspect of mobile listening is the possibility of adding a second layer of private sound to *any* particular place and situation, therefore transforming or enhancing the current spatial experience. Regardless of the specific technology used, this ‘privatized habitat’ exists solely through the audio played back over headphones. Though its materiality lacks in density and visibility, it is an effective tool to mediate the individual’s experience in public space, transforming it by simultaneously ‘creating a concentration of the auditory environment and an extension of our individual bodies’ (Chambers 1994, 94).

In the book *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* Iain Chambers defines the central traits of mobile listening that are still valid to this day: the Walkman – which stands in for all mobile listening devices – is described as both a technical instrument and a cultural activity that encourages us to think inside a new organization of time and space: “Here, as opposed to the discarded ‘grand narratives’ (Lyotard) of the City, the Walkman offers the possibility of a micro narrative, a customized story and soundtrack, not merely a space but a place, a site of dwelling” (Chambers 1994, 51).

These characteristics have also caught the attention of many artists that work with portables and headphones to create situations in public space in which the participant’s experience of taking a walk is transformed through the use of sound. Driven by the impulse of examining and stretching out the boundaries of social norms on the one hand

and by the desire to create narratives that interact with the environment on the other, individual artists and groups have developed different types of audio walks.¹

Artists and practitioners of different fields create audio- or multi-media tracks in which varied elements can be woven in: music and composition, text passages of different authors, sound collages, found footage and field recordings. Many audio walks also use voice recordings in the tracks. These can take on different positions: they narrate, ask questions or give the individual participants instructions during the walk.

I have experimented extensively with this format over the course of the last years. By appropriating quite literally Chambers' notion that the Walkman is part of the equipment of modern nomadism (Chambers 1994, 51), I have been examining the subject of female migration through a series of audio walk experiments. The topic of migration is central to my artistic research and I am also interested in how one's gender and identity influences the perception and experience of the city.

Mobility and Embodiment

Mobility also touches upon questions regarding the identity of the bodies moving through space. Who these bodies are, how they think, feel and act while walking through a *specific* location – all of these questions are elemental parts of the practice:

¹ Though there are many designations for this artistic format, I will use the term audio walk throughout this article to describe experiments and works that combine walking and listening to a mediated soundscape over headphones.

Mobilities are embodied, involving fragile, aged, gendered, racialized bodies. Such bodies encounter other bodies, objects and the physical world multi-sensuously. Travel involves corporeal movement and consequential forms of pleasure and pain. Such bodies perform themselves in between direct sensation of the “other” and various sensescapes. Bodies are not empirically fixed and given but involve performances to fold notions of movement, nature, taste and desire into and through the body. Bodies sense and make sense of the world as they move bodily in and through it, creating discursively mediated sensescapes that signify social taste and distinction, ideology and meaning. (Büscher et. al 2011, 6)

The fact that the audio walk is an intrinsically embodied experience is crucial to the experimental works that I have been developing. The narrative format is used to question the interactions with the environment and to evoke memories and personal stories that are connected to a specific location. Walking becomes a tactic of exploration, of reflection and (self-) observation. And the voice that joins the participant over headphones becomes an incorporeal companion, interviewer and confidante.

I am interested in creating an artistic approach to mobile methods while simultaneously researching a subject that I both want to find out more about and create artistic works with. The data produced during my experiments is not intended to create unequivocal responses. It is rather an open proposition that might generate further discussions, ideas and art works. In some cases, the material gathered during these experiments (audio-recordings, interviews, photographs) is directly transformed into art works. In other cases, concepts and topics for new works derive from the dialogues and the material produced.

The ‘Walk-along’ as an Ethnographic Research Tool and Mobile Method

In her article "Street Phenomenology: The Go-Along as Ethnographic Research Tool", sociologist Margarethe Kusenbach describes the ‘go-along’ as a possibility to merge the strengths and advantages of different research methods in ethnographic practice: participant observation, sit-down interviews and walking. As she puts it, “When conducting go-alongs, fieldworkers accompany individual informants on their ‘natural’ outings, and – through asking questions, listening and observing – actively explore their subjects’ stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment.” (Kusenbach 2003, 463)

Kusenbach distinguishes between two different forms of ‘go-along’, depending on the chosen means of locomotion. As the names suggest, the ‘walk-along’ is carried out on foot and the ‘ride-along’ includes a car- or bus ride. In both cases the fieldworker is present during a journey along a route that is included in the informant’s everyday routines, guiding the conversation and deepening it according to specific research interests. In contrast to a seated interview situation, walking and talking take place simultaneously, allowing an intuitive development of the conversation, where the topics and atmosphere can shift spontaneously, driven by external impulses. Kusenbach identifies five themes as particularly suitable to be explored with the mobile method of the ‘walk-along’: environmental perception, spatial practices, biographies, social architecture and social realm.

In the ‘walk-along’ the ethnographer aims at entering a situation that is familiar to the informant while disturbing it as little as possible. In this process, the context is as

important as the person and the information she or he holds. These elements are blended together in the mobile method, enabling the generation of knowledge and data that goes beyond that obtainable through sit-down interviews or participant observation. Walking-along in a specific location brings up information and knowledge *in situ*.

The Audio Walk as Experimental Mobile Method

Following Kusenbach's definition, the situations created in audio walks are 'contrived' or experimental, since they take the participants into unfamiliar territory and engage in activities that are not (necessarily) part of their routines (Kusenbach 2003, 464).

According to her, though the results of such a situation might be interesting, it does not produce the kind of data that would "enhance our understandings of the subjects' authentic practices and interpretations" (Kusenbach 2003, 464).

By using the audio walk as an experimental mobile method, I am not aiming at producing specific answers and results. This notion concurs with the description of mobile methods provided by Büscher, Coulton, Hemment and Mogensen:

Mobile methods are intrinsically experimental. Mobility "broadens the mind", not least because it immerses people in new situations (...) and provides multiple perspectives and multi-sensory impressions. In contrast to scientific experimentation that seeks to systematically isolate causal factors and reduce complexity for analysis, experimentation in and through mobility "goes along with" complexity and emergence. It fosters open-ness to uncertainty, situatedness, feedback effects and reflexivity. (Büscher et. al 2011, 120)

The aspects presented in the statement above are also applicable to the idea of using the audio walk not as a closed presentation format of an artwork that is received by the participant while walking through a space, but as an open system, an instrument in which the environment, the specific participant and the movement are taken into account. The open-ness to uncertainty, situatedness, feedback effects and reflexivity are also present in the audio walk when used as a research tool. It cannot be isolated from a context, either. And especially when applied to a group of people that share a common denominator in their biographies, it suggests possibilities other than the ones presented by the 'Walk-along'.

In contrast to Kusenbach, I argue that 'contrived' or experimental activities, such as the audio walk, can actually be used to increase our knowledge about the subject's practices and experiences. The contrast between the artificial framework and 'real-life' situations emphasizes the nature of the latter (Weber 2008, 190). With the natural soundscape augmented and transformed through the content on the headphones, impossible situations seem plausible and different images and memories are evoked in the mind of the individual participant. In this way, aspects of the environment can become apparent that were otherwise invisible or seemed unremarkable. On the other hand, personal narratives are induced by the specific correlation of the visual and sonic experiences.

The 'Walk-Along' and the Audio Walk

The 'walk-along' presents many similarities to my chosen artistic research method. As the name implies, one fundamental part of the audio walk is moving through space on foot. The speed and seamless transition from exterior to interior spaces provides a

freedom of movement that is crucial to the development of the individual's perception of the city's public and private spaces.

But one element is key to understanding the connections and contrasts between the walk-along and the audio walk: while walking, the participant of the artistic format listens to a pre-produced and often site-specific audio track. The content of the track – in the examples that serve as a basis for my work – is predominantly a voice that guides the person throughout the experience by both directing her steps and her attention along the way. Therefore, the participant is also being "accompanied", but not by a physically present human being. In the audio walk, the interviewer of the 'walk-along' is substituted by a recording of a voice that acts as a surrogate persona.

The function that the voice assumes in the audio walk is precisely that of redirecting and guiding the person's attention towards certain phenomena or subjects that are connected with a specific space. The same is true for the ethnographer employing the 'walk-along' as a method to analyze the relationship between informer and her/his living environment in situ. In both cases, external events might still take hold of the individual's attention, drawing it away from the original topic of the conversation or the audio walk. But precisely these spontaneous encounters and unexpected events might produce other aspects and evoke topics and associations that are relevant to the experience.

To bring the experience into the public realm opens up this space in which the spontaneity and richness of everyday life can enter and alter the set-up. Any fixed

parameters of a set-up are put to a test, yet both the ethnographer working with the walk-along and the artist working with the audio walk want to allow precisely this: the permeability and the organic movements of the city complementing the experience.

One component that is obviously crucial to the experience of the audio walk participant is the audio. Because the artificial soundscape can be confused with the "natural" one, there is a constant oscillation between mediated and contextual experience and the mutual interaction between these two domains (Biserna 2015, 24). The oscillation between different 'spaces' is also common while one is walking on the streets of a city. At moments, one is caught in a trail of thought that leads the mind and imagination away from the current environment, then suddenly this shifts, something present in the field of perception catches our attention and once more, we are interested and focused on our surroundings (Fischer-Lichte 2012, 65). In the audio walk, the additional layer of sound extends these spaces even further. Sounds, voices and different elements boost the repertoire that one is confronted with when walking in the city. While in a non-mediated walk the unexpected only presents itself spontaneously, it can be created "on purpose" in the audio walk. The sounds and narratives create surprising situations and moods that contrast with the world that is directly perceived. The participant, walking on her or his own, is drawn into an experience that fluctuates between the fictional and the actual, the real and the imaginary.

Intruding Presence vs. Intruding Voice

This aspect is further emphasized by the fact that there is no direct interaction with a person who is physically present: the linear audio track that guides the trail of thought

and perception of the participant incorporates both the actual and the artificial soundscape, switching from one to the other seamlessly. In contrast to this, a fieldworker – as described in the ‘go-along’ – might sense some internal movement of the informant and direct the conversation accordingly. But it might be perceived as intrusive to the interviewed person if the fieldworker makes use of hints and emotional indications to deepen a specific subject further.

Though Margarethe Kusenbach makes an effort to create a ‘natural’ go-along in which the person is followed in a familiar environment or during outings that she would go on anyway (Kusenbach 2003: 463), there is the problem of the fieldworker’s physical presence:

There can be no doubt that go-alongs, like interviews and even participant observation, are always ‘contrived’ social situations that disturb the unfolding of ordinary events. Go-alongs intentionally aim at capturing the stream of perceptions, emotions and interpretations that informants usually keep to themselves. The presence and curiosity of someone else undoubtedly intrudes upon and alters this delicate, private dimension of lived experience. (Kusenbach 2003, 464)

In contrast, the potential of the audio walk as research tool lies in the physical absence of a ‘someone else’. Though the voice over the headphones asks questions, points out specific aspects in the environment and tells short stories that fuel the imagination, a response is not required. The experience happens in a mostly “undisturbed” manner. The headphones emphasize this introspective and thoughtful moment by creating what

might be called an “auditory bubble” (Bull 2007) that partially isolates the participant from her external environment.

As the philosopher Stefan Niklas points out, the headphones produce an acoustic decoupling that creates a distance between the listener-observer and the present situation (Niklas 2014, 73): The participant examines the present domain without feeling completely involved in it. This opens up a space in which the person can calmly observe, imagine, remember and reflect upon her own experience. An intensity is achieved by this concentrated form of distanced observation while still being immersed in a specific situation.

Instead of the intruding presence of someone else, the person is left to herself during the audio walk experiment. Still, a similar discomfort might be felt in this work when the questions become more personal. The person might still feel exposed, yet there is neither an interviewing individual nor the need to immediately answer to any questions. The imagination, thought- and memory processes are activated, yet they don't have to be verbalized. The voice listened to over headphones creates an intimacy that does not include the inhibiting factor that the presence of a stranger might entail. Therefore, the private dimension of the lived experience is preserved.

Surrogate Persona vs. Physically Present Artist

Janet Cardiff, an artist well known for the innumerable Audio- and Video Walks she has been creating since the early nineties, moved away from performative, dialogic formats in which she was physically present and towards a mediated presence of her voice (and

later video image) early on. The curator and art historian Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev sees this shift in Cardiff's artistic practice in 1992, after she had created a work entitled "Intimacies", in which the artist invited people who had answered to an ad to talk face-to-face about the eponymous subject. Christov-Bakargiev states that Cardiff then noticed how her own presence was inhibiting and awkward to the strangers she encountered. In her opinion this "(...) fostered the idea of creating a fictional 'Janet', a surrogate persona, whose voice could gently lure her audience deep into her artworks, without literally needing to be there" (Christov-Bakargiev 2001, 30). 'Janet' has been a recurring character and a distinctive feature in Janet Cardiff's *Walks* since then.

In her audio walks, the voice recordings and the headphones enable Cardiff to create a private space in which to address various subjects while the person is in movement at a specific location. In "Disappearing Act" I used the same set-up. But in contrast to Cardiff, whose intent is to create an immersive, narrative experience for the individual participants, my aim was to additionally trigger personal memories in a *specific* group of individuals, in order to find out more about their experience in a subsequent conversation.

Disappearing Act – An Audio Walk at the Airport

One core experiment that I conducted took place in the *Cologne-Bonn* airport in March 2014. The audio walk entitled "Disappearing Act" was developed especially for airports and was carried out with a group of thirteen women with whom I worked during several months in a series of experiments. Each of the women had arrived at this airport from another country a few months earlier to live in the city of Cologne. The site was chosen

for the work especially because a significant event in the women's biographies is linked to it: the act of moving to another country on their own.

We went to the airport with the sole purpose of carrying out the audio walk. So the women returned to the site without the intention of travelling or engaging in any other practical activities associated with the space. Instead, they were equipped with mobile devices and headphones and given a playlist with six tracks, a map of the different areas of the airport, a notebook (for personal use) and instructions on where to meet after the *Walk* had been completed. Since the audio tracks were arranged in a different order for each of them, the women only met briefly along the way and enjoyed the experience of the audio walk individually.

[Audio: "Disappearing Act Excerpt 1" JOHANNA STEINDORF]

In contrast to other airports, the dimensions of the *Cologne-Bonn* allow one to traverse it from one end to the other in less than 15 minutes. For each track, which was 3 to 5 minutes long, the participants had to walk through the area in question, where they listened to the corresponding audio-track while exploring the surroundings. They could also write into their notepads whenever they felt like it, especially in breaks between the different audio tracks. At the end of the audio walk we got together in a café, where we engaged in a group discussion about their experience.

[Audio: "Group at Airport" JOHANNA STEINDORF]

I developed the content of the tracks for six different locations within the airport. They were primarily composed of voice recordings of a narrative that takes into consideration not only the functional uses of each space, but also the metaphorical connotations and the specific implications for someone embarking on a trip to a new place of residence that will change the course of their life as a whole.

The track entitled “Encounter” for example, led them to the arrival area, where on the one hand they were asked to observe the people awaiting loved-ones or business partners and to imagine the feelings and expectations connected to the arrivals. On the other hand, they were reminded of their *own* entrance to Germany and all of the feelings and expectations that this moment contained for *them*.

The voice speaking to the participant directly over headphones enhanced both the perception of the environment by pointing out specific properties and the introspective quality of the experience by posing questions about the participant’s biography and the connections to this specific site.

Excerpt from one of the tracks:

Walk around and search for a little space from which you can look into the

Security Area: are there any people inside?

It’s so odd that you have to open all of your bags, take off some pieces of clothing,

right in front of many other people- mostly strangers. You see businessmen

taking off their shoes and belts, without complaining, without losing their

posture.

Now look behind you: are there people saying goodbye?

Think back: Do you remember how it was when you left for Germany? Did someone accompany you or were you on your own?

The fact that they took the audio walk by themselves, undisturbed, and listened to the tracks while leisurely walking through the locations, created a situation of deep reflexivity and contemplation. In this process, the senses were immersed in the environment and in their own imagination, the participant's attention oscillating between the current situation, memory and imagination.

Excerpt from the subsequent conversation:

00:05:22-9 Johanna: Was there one place (during the audio walk at the airport) where the experience was the strongest? One place or one space where you thought it was more intense or interesting?

00:05:45-0 Adrienne: For me it was the security area. Because that's where you say bye. And you have to really go. And that's where it's been saddest for me every time. And then you're still like... I still know that my mom is still in the airport. But you... you might as well not be, because you're already gone. And that's sad.

00:06:04-6 Sara: And it's weird because you're saying goodbye and it's sad and then you turn around and you have to take off your jacket and open your bag...

00:06:20-6 Adrienne: Yeah! I was crying and he was doing like a bomb check on me. You have no space to be sad, I think.

As the excerpt of the conversation makes clear, the environmental perception is intrinsically linked to the participants' biographies. Though they might observe different constitutive elements within the space, their gazes are impregnated with their own past experience and the emotions connected to them. Both 'themes' – biography and environmental perception - therefore merge into one, influencing and enhancing each other.

Memory as a spontaneous impulse and progressive activity

The architecture of the airport is designed with an emphasis on its functional use, including elements that are exclusive to this location – especially signals and sounds. Consequently, the architecture of each airport is different yet it holds recognizable features that are identical or similar to airports all over the world. Simply walking through the space can therefore evoke personal stories and emotions connected to past experiences at the same airport or a similar one.

Through its recognizable features, the environment is favorable to a spontaneous process of reminiscing, which can also be triggered by sounds. Jean-François Augoyard and Henri Torgue have coined it “Anamnesis” when sounds trigger memories accidentally. In their book *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds* they describe the phenomenon as follows:

An effect of reminiscence in which a past situation or atmosphere is brought back to the listener’s consciousness, provoked by a particular signal or sonic context. Anamnesis, a semiotic effect, is the often involuntary revival of memory caused by listening and the evocative power of sounds. (Augoyard and Torgue 2006, 21)

The “evocative power of sounds” is twofold in the audio walk. On the one hand there is the sonic context of the airport, in which certain signals appear within the location. Although the headphones cup the ears, external sounds still get in, signals and noises

characteristic to this space still reach the participant and might spark spontaneous memories. On the other hand, the audio track also evokes memories, but in this case through an artificial soundscape, words and a narrative structure that initiate an active process of thinking. Sonic context and audio track overlay and complement each other, creating both immediate impulses and gradual yet more engaged processes in which remembering is also an act of thought and self-reflection. Though remembering as an active process constitutes the center of the experiment, *Anamnesis*, as spontaneous or involuntary reminiscence, might additionally occur during the Walk.

In “Disappearing Act” all of the women are walking at the same time, each of them listening to the same voice, the same audio tracks (though in a different chronological order), but on their own. This allows them to explore the environment in their own time and it allows me to be “present” with each person of the group simultaneously without intruding. It creates an individual experience that is also a shared one. The feeling of an individual yet shared experience is extended to the second part of the experiment, in which the group discussion takes place. Since they are aware of their common background from prior meetings, the participants can assume that the experience was similarly significant for the others, which opens up a ground for a trusted conversation. Their impressions still fresh, they can share their ideas and memories in an environment in which the women are not exposed to an external onlooker.

The immediacy of the dialogue is lost, in contrast to Kusenbach’s method, because it is reserved to the second, separate part of the experiment. But this enables two important aspects: first, the individual experience during the audio walk, which allows a focused

and immersed perception, and second, a reflected conversation that includes both the audio walk in itself and the memories and experiences that were evoked by it. Both spontaneous encounters and thoughtful considerations are a part of the process, just as anamnesis and an active process of remembering are.

The location and route have been defined beforehand, so the tracks are developed specifically for this situation. By knowing the identity of the chosen participants, the artist can also take biographical facts into consideration and weave them (discretely) into the audio tracks. In this way, the specificities of the individual's relationship to the space come into the center of attention in a much more intimate, subjective manner. And this is precisely where the specificity of the audio walk lies: It can be adapted both to the environment and to the individuals. The experience profits from the knowledge that the artist/researcher acquired beforehand to create situations that seem new, unexpected and unique, though they could be repeated many times with many different people.

The Range of Possibilities of the Audio Walk as a Research Tool

As a method, the audio walk can be prepared for *one* specific place or for a *certain type* of space that exists in various geographic locations, therefore becoming applicable to different sites around the world. Though “Disappearing Act” was created for *Cologne-Bonn*, it could easily be adapted for any other airport. It could also be adapted for different participants. The audio walk at the airport *Cologne-Bonn* could be repeated with groups varying in age, country of origin, gender etc.

What sets the audio walk apart as an experimental mobile method is the fact that the artificial soundscape enhances the participant's experience. It infiltrates the actual soundscape at times, at others it clearly juxtaposes the sounds in the environment. Therefore the voice, the surrogate persona, is not the only important element of the experience. Yet, in combination with the sound effects and the specific situation, it can create awareness for certain topics, set a tone and define a field of attention within a route and location.

Since a pre-produced track is used, it makes it possible to conduct innumerable, but also remote audio walk experiments. I could send the corresponding files of "Disappearing Act" to any given country and let a group of English speaking immigrant women perform it at the local airport.

It could also be used to communicate with a group of people that don't speak the researcher's/ artist's language or to conduct a walk following a very precise set of rules in which the fieldworker's performance cannot vary or be distracted by topics that would come up spontaneously in a conversation – as could happen in the 'walk-along'.

Conclusion: The Audio Walk as a Method

To sum up, the audio walk as a method for artistic research comprises three different parts: 1) a previous interview and group situation, in which the participants get to know each other and the artist/ researcher herself, 2) the audio walk, which is conducted individually without any external interruption, and 3) the group discussion, in which the thoughts, memories and interpretations are externalized. Within these parts, two

complementary aspects of the situation can be consciously selected: the specific group of individuals and the location. For a comparative study, the same framework can be used and repeated with several groups or sites (of the same or different kind).

When it comes to the audio walk, apart from being an instrument, a method to enquire on certain aspects of a person's relationship to a specific location, it is an augmented experience in itself that can evoke other forms of interaction, thought and perception. Therefore, it can bring up ideas and memories that a common, unmediated walk in a familiar environment would not - at least not in the same way.

The routine and the familiar are disrupted. An artificial element is introduced that changes the perception of the environment and how the listener-walker is inserted into it. By making the participant the recipient of this narrative and artistic content, which she or he is the main character of, the person's attention is redirected and a suspended moment is created far away from everyday life yet right in the middle of it. Thus, what first appeared to be a situation that seemed "out of place", as Iain Chambers puts it, might just as well be a moment of reconfiguration, revealing new insights in the experience that is first and foremost an embodied one. The conscious, mediated distance to the world of everyday life might bring new aspects into the light that were concealed, hidden or forgotten. Therefore, both the (artist-) researcher and the participants draw valuable insights from the experience.

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