LOCATIVE MEDIA WALKS: GEO-LOCATIVE MEDIA AS MEANS OF SUBVERTING HEGEMONIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

Dana Papachristou
ntaniela@gmail.com

RESUMEN: En este artículo, intento conectar los paseos auditivos, es decir, las intervenciones sonoras geolocalizadas o mediadas tecnológicamente en el espacio público a través del movimiento, con los conceptos del nomadismo y el rizoma de Gilles Deleuze y Félix Guattari. Por un lado, el objetivo es ilustrar cómo los trabajos artísticos interactivos y específicos del sitio con el uso de tecnología de medios geolocalizados producen un entorno de aurality aumentada dentro del espacio público. Por otro lado, me propongo describir cómo las teorías del arte nómada y menor pueden encontrar su implementación en prácticas artísticas que se enfocan en caminar y escuchar en/a la ciudad como un espacio liso, incluyendo narrativas, historias, paisajes sonoros e historiografías menores a través de tecnologías GPS recientes. Por último, me baso en la combinación de varias teorías sobre el arte, el espacio, la corporeidad, el caminar y la tecnología, para explorar nuevas direcciones estéticas en el arte de caminar geolocalizado en el espacio público.

PALABRAS CLAVE: medios locativos, paseos auditivos, nomadismo, rizoma

Recibido: 1/02/2022 | Aceptado: 5/05/2022
doi: 10.30827/sobre.v8i.23875
Introduction

In this paper I will attempt to connect contemporary artistic practices of site-specific sound compositions and geo-located sound interventions in urban public space such as audio walks, with the concepts of rhizome and nomadism, as introduced and explained by Deleuze and Guattari in both books of Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Anti-Oedipe and Mille Plateaux. My goal is, firstly, to demonstrate how creating site-specific and interactive artistic works with the use of geo-locative media technology, can result to an environment of augmented aurality within public space, and, secondly, to describe how a new way of public nomad art can branch around, by walking and listening in/to the city as a smooth space, thus creating an experimentation with a new media of inscription, established between new media applications and urban public space.

The field of study is ethnographic research through sound and walking, as well as artistic research based on listening and sound art. Using participant observation as a methodology, with participation in the artistic practice mentioned, field recordings and production of geo-locative art works, I have been working very closely to the field, both as an artist and as an art and media theorist. My participation in many relevant artistic projects in public space helps my in-depth understanding of the field, while studying it theoretically and practically at the same time. In addition to that, I aim to connect these conclusions with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notions and theories in regards with nomadism, minor art, nomad art and the rhizomatic relations to be created within this framework. Last, I draw upon the combination of several theories on art, space, embodiment, walking and technology, so as to explore new aesthetic directions in public space geo-locative walking art.

Sound walks, audio walks, listening walks: soundscape and walking

Sound walks, audio walks and listening walks as artistic practices encourage conscious listening and interaction with the sound environment while physically walking an area. There is a distinction between these three artistic practices: a listening walk is walking while concentrating in hearing the existing sounds of an area. A sound walk is the exploration of a specific area’s soundscape with the use of a score as a guide, usually the score being a map that draws the attention of the listener to unusual sounds or places to stand and listen throughout the route. In a sound walk, the creators and the walker can interact with the soundscape contrary to the listening walks, which focus on active, conscious or deep listening techniques without speaking, interacting or merging with it. An audio walk is a walk in which the soundscape of an area is augmented through the use of technology: pre-recorded sounds from the same – or any other – area, narratives, music or soundscape compositions come to the surface during the walkthrough, with the use of GPS geo-located mobile applications and their browser based editors (Papachristou, 2021, pp. 151-158).

Although sound, listening and audio walks were established as an autonomous artistic practice rather recently, the term has been used since the 70s by members of the World Soundscape Project as a practice of browsing the soundscape of an area using a score-map that draws attention to unusual sounds (Westerkamp, 1974/2007). Murray Schafer (1969 & 1977) brings forth the issue of active listening and hence the cleansing of the ears, and invents the term soundscape in order to describe our sound environment that becomes a central concept in the development of the interdisciplinary field called sound studies. Moreover, the impact of the concept in anthropology becomes immediately evident in the pioneering ethnography of Steven Feld (1982 & 2004), which marks the awareness of anthropologists in sound culture and addresses the soundscape as a cultural system, making him the theoretical proponent of acoustemology – an epistemological model that exceeds the primacy of vision in western art and science.

From a different field and view, sound walks, audio walks and listening walks are often related to the theoretical approach of Burckhardt’s promenadology (Fezer and Schmitz, 2012) and flânerie (Baudelaire and Benjamin), because as artworks they invite the walker/listener into a wandering within an aurally augmented public space. Lucius Burckhardt, derived from the field of architectural design and sociology, uses the human body in motion in order to study urban space and proposes a broad approach of urban space, promenadology, whose principal methodological tool is walking, enriching the sensory...
intake of the built environment by the urban imaginary of pageantry and daydreaming. Walter Benjamin leads a significant theoretical role both by referring to Charles Baudelaire as a wanderer in the city of modernism, and by taking over the role of the wanderer in his work on arcades (Passagenwerk) which was unfortunately never completed. The concept of the passive walker in the city is transformed in 1920s by André Breton, who uses walking to experiment with automatic writing and to trigger certain social attitudes in public space. The political stake is crystallized even more clearly in the ‘50s, with the term psychogeography, a set of ideas and practices developed within the artistic current of Letterists. Criticizing Urban Geography, the Letterist International (and later the Situationist International) identifies a function of enforcement and monitoring within the city, by exploring the emotional/psychological impact of urban planning and architecture to its inhabitants. Guy Debord’s psychogeographic wandering manual in the late 50s identifies and proposes a liberating dimension of the dérive.

These distinct walking genres require a different approach and lead to different artistic results. Listening walks derive from a genealogy of active, conscious or deep listening, with the World Soundscape Project playing an important role in the creation of the genre. Walking while wandering in and listening to the actual soundscape, emerges as audio tours without the condition of the voice to provide an explanation of visual stimuli. These are silent walks in the public or semi-private space related to nature, and sound immersion in the actual soundscape of an area is their characteristic. Katerina Tzedaki (2014) is a greek-based artist teaching in the University of Rethymnon, and has been creating many listening walks connected with the practice of active listening in public space.

Sound walks, as a practice that encourages merging with the existing soundscape, include interaction with it, production of sounds and discovery of interesting places to stand/sit and listen: two examples would be Akio Suzuki and Janet Cardiff, among others, who both showed a preference for creation, provoking interactions with their chosen environment, instead of walking in silence and trying to intervene as little as possible in the soundscape. Akio Suzuki’s Otodate Soundwalk in various places around the globe uses a stencil to mark the most appropriate place to stand and explore the aural environment of the chosen area.

As for audio walks, the technological condition surpasses the real soundscape, creating a condition where every sound is part of the real soundscape: pre-recorded sounds, stories and narratives, music and sound art compositions, all become audio files to be assigned onto the map of an area, so as to create a geo-locative experience of walking and listening in public space. The actual soundscape of an area is of secondary importance, as audio walks are listened to through mobile application platforms and headphones. There are many platforms available for this goal, such as noTours.org, Echoes.xyz, GeoComposer and many more, offering technological possibilities of aural augmentation of reality.

Located media technology

Locative media art practices, the audio walks, use the aforementioned platforms as a tool that combines locative media technology, music/sound compositions, narratives and performance arts by applying them onto a mapped area, creating an environment of *augmented aurality* within public space. The users of such applications can attach sounds on the map of an area, and later, when the listeners are physically situated at the point of this attachment, they can hear the pre-located sounds, through the system environment of a mobile phone. The application detects the user-listener’s location via GPS and plays back the geo-located audio files, where they have been pre-located by the user/s. Geo-locative media technology aims to reverse the process through which only certain cultural expressions become part of the cultural heritage, offering the community a tool to engage in these processes by linking the real space with people’s collective memory. As Rebecca Solnit (2000) writes, introducing us to her work on the history of walking, «the most obvious and the most obscure thing in the world» (p. 3), the research on walking offers us the paths and meeting points leading «into religion, philosophy, landscape, urban policy, anatomy, allegory, and heartbreak...» (p. 3).

The issue of state-of-the-art technology is applicable here in a rather different sense: already existing technologies are used for artistic purposes in accordance with the relational demands of contemporary art. In fact, it is GPS technology that makes all of the above artistic projects possible and accessible. The GPS project was originally named Navstar GPS and was initiated by the U.S. Ministry of Defense in 1973. Until 1978 all satellites were available for geo-location, although its use was restricted to the U.S. military until the 1980s. Even at that time, the U.S. military was selecting which location to allow or restrict, through the Selective Availability Program. Today, with the extensive use of such a technology on our everyday life, GPS is still controlled by the United States government, which can deny access to other governments depending on the political and geo-political situation and the U.S. military and foreign policies’ interests. At the moment Russia uses the GLONASS system (Russian Global Navigation Satellite System) since the 2000s, China uses the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System since 2020, Europe uses the Galileo navigation satellite system, India uses NavIC, and Japan uses Quasi-Zenith Satellite System (QZSS) for Asia-Oceania, expected to be completely independent in 2023.

As is it easily understood, such scales of technological innovation are not available to citizens nor artists. All the geo-locative audio walks mentioned here, are not producing a new technology: artistic teams, collectives, or artists are in no way able to produce and use their own systems, as they are not in any position to launch and control their own satellite. The whole artistic genre is using existing technologies, made possible by the expanded
usage through smartphones with embedded GPS navigation tools. In addition to that, google maps, google earth and geo-locative applications were made open and accessible to the public in the recent years, and are not yet in their full operational possibilities. With the advent of mobile applications and everyday use by all of us, their alternative use for artistic purposes promotes an augmented aural reality that attempts – or could have the intention – to use everyday technologies with the intention to subvert them. For example, accurate geolocation and route delimitation can be used in our vehicle’s GPS to guide us to a point on the map accurately, calculating the shortest route. But a geo-locative audio walk can help us to roam freely in an area, listening to soundscapes, stories, music and sound compositions, helping us to compose our own sound experience, depending on the route we choose. The range of the resounding areas onto a map is defined by the creator of the project through the platform or browser-based systems related to the mobile platforms, but the final choice of the walker/listener is the factor that will determine which sound will be heard first, how the sounds will mix and how long they will last, depending on the choice of roads, the speed of walking and the direction of crossing the geographical area.

Moreover, the condition of site-specificity that is attached to this artistic practice can be a direct link with the territory, the urban or rural space, and other areas depending their cultural and geographical identity. Audio walks attach sounds onto the actual map, which gives the opportunity for the creation of site-specific works that can comment on the soundscape, augment it, include hidden aural aspects of it, or even ignore it altogether, the latter being a significant comment as well. The result is collaborative maps and audio walks about and inside the territory, that can highlight the way its residents are experiencing it, especially when the area is a city, a neighborhood, or a community’s location. Itineraries are thus created, which evade from the primarily visual and panoptically designed urban planning, by suggesting a new cartographic model that could represent various layers of perception and experience of urban space, based on movement, narratives, culturally significant soundscapes and minor histories.

This artistic practice can include voice and is open to various petits récits (Lyotard, 1984) that can be formed out of sound and narrative. Moreover, it is relevant with discourses about space and the processes of its transformation into place through a «walking ethnography», as Tim Ingold would suggest (Ingold, 2000, p. 331). Strolling within an aurally augmented city can be an open-ended artistic gesture, ready to be re-interpreted and re-toured by each listener. These platforms are a tool for détournement, appropriating the widely spread format of tourist guides into a medium for non-touring and non-guiding, but still impelling the listener into strolling into an open-ended dérive. The notion of augmented aurality, as used in the artistic practice of audio walks, consists of the intervention on space with audio means. This intervention is an experience of immersion to a hybrid environment between material and potential reality, which employs the multiple levels of the constantly transforming notion of public space: structured and virtual environment, social networks, digital communities.

Figura 8: Photo of Echoes.xyz platform by Josh Kopeček. Audio walk for Documenta 14 in Athens, Visual Sounds of documenta14 Aneducation Program workshops. Photo retrieved from Yorgos Samandas’ personal archive
There are many audio walks that can be used as examples for this specific artistic practice. Akoo.o artistic team is a group of artists and researchers that focus on sound and mobility as vehicles of expression and social inquiry\(^1\). Their work Dwelling Stories is an audio walk geo-located in the garden of the Archaeological Museum of Athens, connected with a conference on Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* that took place in the Italian Institute of Athens in 2015. The sound piece consists of narratives of residents of Athens, for which Greece is not their birth country: the interlocutors share their memories and first impressions of the city, the reasons of their visit and settlement, their aspirations and disappointments, creating a sound experience of sharing personal stories that can be shared with the general public in no other way than geo-locatively.

Moreover, another example of hidden historiography is TwixtLab’s audio walk in Portbou, Spain on September 2021. Within the framework of B-AIR – Art Infinity Radio, music for babies, toddlers and vulnerable groups\(^2\), co-funded by the Creative Europe program of the European Union, TwixtLab created an audio walk in the city of Portbou for CRESSON – AAU LAB’s conference «Radio Benjamin»\(^3\). In this audio walk, TwixtLab navigated through the city where Benjamin committed suicide trying to flee the rise of fascism in Europe. The audio files consisted of a sound art composition together with narration of his correspondence with Theodor and Gretel Adorno from 1928 to 1940. The extracts were selected in order to depict the communication between the two thinkers, their concerns about the political situation in Europe, and the short stay of Benjamin in Portbou through the historical land points inside the city.

These practices underline how sound walk artists approach new technologies with the intention of incorporating the experience of immersion in urban – or non-urban – wandering through available technologies. These audio walks can include stories, memories and narratives, minor historical references from important or personal events, *petits récits* (Lyotard, 1984) around the experience of the inhabitants of each city and their cultural

---

1 https://akooocollective.wordpress.com/
2 https://b-air.infinity.radio/en/
3 https://aau.archi.fr/cresson/cres-s-o-u-n-d/radio-benjamin/
heritage. At the same time, the soundscape and the technique of active listening can be enriched with a social gesture, and thus reinforce the role of contemporary art as a relational grid of interactions with social targeting (Bourriaud, 2001).

**Rhizome – Nomadism**

In relation to the principles of the rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari suggest the rhizome is a way to combine various conditions, the link between the image and the object-world. It is the essence of any complex relationship between concepts, living organisms, bodies without organs, social conditions, political periods and the essence of each unit of these relationships separately. Each system not based on arborescence, on root or tree-structure and dichotomy, is potentially rhizomatic. Through this point of view, many things can have the properties of the rhizome and be governed by its principles. Similarly, the practice of sound walks, audio walks, and listening walks can be understood as a rhizomatic artistic entity, as a process both concerning the parts that are being composed and how this binding occurs. But what might be the way to detect a rhizome into an artistic practice or interpret artistic works as rhizomes? What relations are being developed between sounds within the environment in which they sound? How does a walking sound work functions within the space in which it resounds? And which is the rhizomatic part: the artistic result, the relationship of sounds with walking, the relationship between the sounds and the city, or ultimately is it that art might be a rhizomatic process overall?

A rhizome, as applied in walking sound artworks, «can connect any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature» (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, p. 21). They are «not composed of units but of dimensions and directions in motion [...] they have neither beginning nor end, but always a milieu from which they grow and which they overspill» (Guattari, 1980, p. 21). Such walking sound works are made out of lines as a rhizome is: both conceptually and literally, the trails they encompass as a process of recording, geo-positioning and walking propose a deterritorialization, a territorialization and a reterritorialization at the same time. There is a production and reproduction of the sound, as field recordings are extracted and repositioned onto the map, while the final sound work depends also on the trails the walker/listener opts for.

In regards with the rhizomatic connections and the nomad, itinerant art, the issue here is not the actual geographical location. Instead the theoretical background is purely conceptual. Nomadism in art does not refer to literal movement. It is only by coincidence...
that these theories are linked to walking practices in public space. The artistic practices at stake could be stable and connected with a specific geographical point. Nomadism refers to the way in which contemporary art attacks established and hegemonic art forms, fixed political structures and mentalities, with a tendency to subvert them, to defeat them, to abolish them, within the general subversive intention of abolitionism. This practice can be traced back to the abolitionment of the fixed and unified subject in post-structuralism, and finds application in many artistic and political currents of contemporary art today. The rhizomatic way of connecting the individual elements, strengthens the nomadism by providing tactics of détournement to be applied onto the public space, the body, the state, the technology, and to use the panoptic satellite as a weapon and a tool to undermine its own usefulness. Therefore, the following connections may be literal but mainly they appear here metaphorically and conceptually.

An important part of the artistic process is the selection of the audio material, which can consist of soundscapes, narratives, existing or imagined sounds, slogans, and soundscape compositions. These works can pertain to a map that must be produced/constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits, as well as its own lines of flight. In the same way, in all three types of walking sound works, the roles of the artist and the listener often coincide, both in cases where sounds are recorded while crossing the area and in those where the path chosen by the walker/listener determines the artistic result. Walking sound works are a summary of the exploration of sound and artistic/ethnographic research through sound and soundscape, linking the peripatetical proposal of Ingold and Burckhardt and their approaches to urban space, and could contribute to a theoretical collaboration of soundscape approaches, of urban space studies and of moving researches of human experience. The peripatetical dimension of such artistic projects is critical, and is fully compatible with the relatively recent researches of Tim Ingold towards an ethnography on foot. The link with the movement is both literal, as well as conceptual.

About movement and nomad art (Hendrick, 2012, pp. 27-41), Deleuze and Guattari in Mille Plateaux assign it to «a nomadic absolute, as a local integration moving from part to part in an infinite succession of linkages and changes in direction. It is an absolute that is one with becoming itself, with process» (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, p. 694). But, a nomadic movement, in terms of travelling or migrating, is not obligatory here, the same way that flight as a notion has little to do with wings. The goal is to crack through the system, the œdipodial art that is described as the conservative form of art, to achieve a break through, and to manage to oppose to sovereignty and control in order to achieve change. While talking about the establishment of continuous movement that is based on experience rather than explanation, Deleuze and Guattari (1980, p. 372) see nomad art as a consequence, as the «outsider», as the «itinerant, ambulant, that follows flows in vectorial fields across which singularities are scattered» and as a «streaming, spiraling, zigzagging, sneaking [...] will to art».

Deleuze and Guattari suggest a clear antithesis with the nomad way of being to the system of power that characterizes the State. This antithesis is verbally described as the different mode between nomadic and sedentary. The use of the concept of nomadism in this paper, as in Deleuze and Guattari’s work, does not concentrate on nomadism as a way of social construction but as a notion, as a concept that can be applied into various practices. This concept describes the revolutionary mode of conversing with the apparatuses of capture, with the power and the control that exists in every human activity, including art. This is the reason why nomadism here is so deeply connected with the concept of rhizome. It embraces heterogeneity in free space and the need to occupy and rhizomatically link smooth spaces, even if the hard space, the hard city – that Jonathan Raban (1974) would describe as located on maps in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture - stands in the way of its nomadic demand of free movement.

Regarding walking sound works, especially audio walks whose link with technology is greater, it would be interesting to see which is the element that establishes this rhizomatic and nomadic connection: the geo-located compositions, the dérive or the city? Geo-located compositions is highlighted in the audio walks, the urban space element is highlighted in sound walks and listening walks are about a conscious listening derive. As these artistic practices occur in public space they point out additional relations, not only the transmitter-receiver kind, but a more general context in which art functions socially. An additional rhizomatic element is emerging, the residents’ possibility of direct involvement, through
narratives, stories, and the sound imprint of their sonic identity. Furthermore, through such artistic practices a citizen-centered approach is being suggested, which gives the walker (both the creator of the artwork and the listener) the possibility to use technology as a medium of interaction between public space and its inhabitants.

The first and most apparent reason is the open source or freeware character of the softwares in use (such as noTours.org or Echoes.xyz respectively), which offers the potential to use the editors and the downloadable applications freely, while sharing the code between users was encouraged in the case of noTours.org. At this point, we could introduce issues relating to digital communications, with emphasis on the ever expanding market invasion, but also the problematic around the growing individualization produced by the invasion of digital private spaces in the public sphere, which could be seen partly as a technological continuity of the walkman effect (Thibaud, 2003). It is clear that more general developments work exactly in the opposite direction of the vision of Murray Schafer, towards the isolation from our sound environment instead of a greater engagement and awareness. In this case we are interested in the user’s, or the community of users, ability to develop parallel levels of digital spaces and/or environments in the city, which is an aspect of the specialization of digital societies (Haritos, 2007). Secondly, the inclusion of people’s narratives and stories, stresses the importance of their involvement on the mapping process of an area. In this way the built and the sound environment are intertwined with the emotional landscape that unfolds from the narrative of personal or collective memory, creating culturally informed soundscapes, namely socialscapes. Moreover, the choice of the wandering route is made by the walker rather than the creator of the walk, which puts forth a cultural and social conjunction of routes and people. The walker is encouraged to wander freely in the city and to re-establish a connection with the physical and aural environment of the smooth space, as well as to contribute to the artistic process by determining its form with his own body and its movement.

To sum up, as Deleuze and Guattari imply many social activities, including art, can draw «a plane of consistency, a creative line of flight, a smooth place of displacement» (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, p. 423) by reforming or acting against dominant systems and/or practices. In the case of audiowalking, nomadism does not apply by suggesting a flee from the city. Instead it is used so as to propose wandering as resistance to its confined and bordered space: in these soundscape compositions narratives prevail, communities acquire space and voice, buildings are not mere subjects for sightseeing tour, the city is not a collection of historical information but a space to aurally, artistically, socially wander within the micro-frames of which this space rhizomatically consists. Music and narrative as tools, escape ethnography, documentary, score, concert hall, museums and institutions and become pliable materials, fragments of a living organism, of a city-score whose music is made by and addresses to people: the deleuzian notions apply here «as a war of becoming over being, of the sedentary over the nomadic» (Deuchars, 2011, p. 3).

Conclusion

We have mentioned, here, a nomadic way of creation that includes communities, collectives, art, public space, democratization of the medium and the information, participative works of art, inclusion of communities’ narratives into pubic space interventions. Through new technology and artistic currents there is a possibility to encourage collectivity, inclusion, integration, a conjunction of spaces, people and the routes between them. Will society use art’s nomadic example or will we stay striated, divided and demarcated by walls, fences and enclosures? There is now more than ever a central demand to deterritorialize and decolonize our history, and focus on a nomadic assemblage that will resist by becoming minority, becoming inclusive, creating new routes and smooth spaces to claim, occupy and finally walk – and allow the walk – through.

The issue here is not the new or state-of-the-art technology, but its integration into ethnographic and artistic research: the inclusion of communities in the audio experience, the minor historiography, the emergence of the soundscape, the emphasis on common cultural heritage, the subversion of hegemonic historiography, and the accessibility of participation freely. All of the above can apply with an emphasis on sound and walking, as well as on consciously focusing on the sonic experience. There are many platforms that provide this framework, with free, easy to use, and often open-source ways, but in reality the satellites are finite and the communication protocols with them are pre-arranged top-down. Using
these strategic tools as a palette to subvert them in a nomadic and rhizomatic way is the main interest of these artistic practices, and the emphasis is given to subversion tactics rather than the protocols used or the communication environments applied.

However, one should not assume that locative media audiowalking is in itself an act of drift against dominant systems. Locative media technology relies upon the ultimate panoptic device of satellite supervision, which the users adopt within the lures of postmodern, immaterial capitalism. But as the capitalization of individual movement establishes itself alongside the colonization of private space, it is the movement between milieus, the reflection upon our shifting habitat, and the détournement of the parts of a well-working machine that can provide the ability to evade from a stagnant structure. From this perspective, we can view this artistic process, as a dialogue between fields, a discursive negotiation with our social, physical and digital environment, as an act that can unravel the way public sound can be formed, used and walked through.

References


