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Public Poetry: Encountering the Lyric in Urban Space¹

This paper explores the presence of the poetic word in contemporary urban settings: from “Poetry in Motion,” displayed in the New York City subway at the very place where one usually finds ads, to fluid xenon light projections of huge verse on the exterior of buildings in Basel or Zurich by visual artist Jenny Holzer, who presents poems of the Nobel Laureate Wisława Szymborska together with her own short “Truisms.” Or from single poems permanently written on walls – e.g. a much-discussed concrete poem by Eugen Gomringer at the facade of a Berlin college of education – to the technically enhanced spoken word, audible from far away as a side effect of gigantic poetry slam events in stadiums, e.g. the Trabrennbahn (race-course) in Hamburg and even performative events such as Ulrike Almut Sandig’s „augenpost“ in which poems are ‘published’ on posters, flyers and free postcards in the urban space of Leipzig or declaimed on public squares in Indian metropolises through a megaphone. Such presentations of poetry in urban space are still uncommon, thus creating an aesthetic experience that differs strongly from reception in private settings or even in readings or public poetry festivals, as the poem relates to its urban surroundings.

Keywords: contemporary poetry, public space, urban sociology, Jenny Holzer, Ulrike Almut Sandig, Eugen Gomringer, Barbara Köhler

In the introduction to his “Literary Theory,” Terry Eagleton examines (and thereby questions) various attempts to define literature, occasionally giving examples of poetic language in public space:

¹ The author is indebted to Norbert Gestring for his insights into urban sociology.

Perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or ‘imaginative,’ but because it uses language in peculiar ways. [...] Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech. If you approach me at a bus stop and murmur ‘Thou still unravished bride of quietness,’ then I am instantly aware that I am in the presence of the literary. I know this because the texture, rhythm and resonance of your words are in excess of their abstractable meaning – or, as the linguists might more technically put it, there is a disproportion between the signifiers and the signifieds. Your language draws attention to itself, flaunts its material being, as statements like ‘Don’t you know the drivers are on strike?’ do not.²

The arguments to follow will be twofold: on the one hand, the paper will rely on concepts of Russian Formalism and Prague Structuralism, which distinguish ‘poetic’ from ‘prosaic’ language by its application of literary devices as well as its dependency on context. At the same time, it will argue that it is the unexpected literariness of poetic language in the public realm that permits words, lines, or stanzas to appear as ‘lyric.’³

Urban sociology defines ‘public space’ according to three basic features: accessibility, anonymity and openness to different kinds of actions.⁴ Public space is opposed to private space, the second basic spatial realm of the city. Private space is the *locus* of intimacy and subjectivity, where the literary genre of poetry in particular was situated for centuries: poetry published in books and read on one’s own in a domestic setting.



Figure 1: Waste Bin in Hamburg (2009).

² Eagleton (1983: 2).

³ My use of the term ‘lyric’ is related to Jonathan Culler’s notion, who defines it as “a Western tradition of short, nonnarrative, highly rhythmical productions, often stanzaic, whose aural dimension is crucial” (Culler 2015: 89). Contrary to Culler I will also refer to ‘poetry’ and ‘the poetic word’ in a broader sense.

⁴ Cf. Gestring et al. (2005: 225-226).

Alienated proverbs displayed on German waste bins urging inhabitants to use them may serve as an example here (Figure 1). Such consciously applied poetic devices attract the pedestrian's attention by creating what Roman Jakobson called the "palpability of signs." In Jakobson's view, literature is distinct from non-literary texts because it activates the "aesthetic" or "poetic function" of language, a "focus on the message for its own sake,"⁵ or in Victor Shklovsky's well-known words: literature exists "in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony."⁶ Thus, the recipient 'stumbles' over the words, much like over a stone, and pays close attention to them. The resulting slowdown of perception offers the chance of "observing language at work":

Indem die poetische Rede ‚das Wort als Wort‘ inszeniert, lenkt sie die Aufmerksamkeit auf die materiellen, strukturalen und relationalen Qualitäten der Worte selbst: die Wörter tragen ihre Bedeutungen nicht in sich, sie werden ihnen in der Rede aufgetragen. Wenn in der poetischen Sprache also zu sich kommt, verliert sie ihre Transparenz auf die gemeinten Gegenstände (Gefühle etc.), der Automatismus der Bedeutungen wird irritiert.⁷

Poetic language is perceived as such if it creates deviations, a heightened awareness of its materiality and structure – an 'aesthetic surplus' that exceeds the communicative function dominating the public sphere with its cacophony of street signs, ads, sirens, acoustic signals, people talking, screaming, etc. The unexpected language play that appears on waste bins – which changes an idiomatic phrase such as *selten so wohl gefühlt* ('rarely felt so well') to *selten so wohl gefüllt* ('rarely filled so well') – is an example of the sudden 'dominance' of the poetic function. In other words, experiential phenomena such as standing at a bus stop and unexpectedly hearing or reading words like "Thou still unravished bride of quietness" – a line from John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1820) – is what this paper is about: it will explore the surprising, stimulating, even unsettling presence of the poetic word in contemporary urban space. At the same time, it will examine the 'in-betweenness' of poetry encountered in the city: shifting not only between the oral and the written mode, between communicative message and aesthetic experience, but also between distance and proximity, public and private discourse, thus corresponding to the two contrasting social spheres of action mentioned above. How does a subject encounter the sudden presence of the lyric in urban space and how are poetry and city related?

⁵ Jakobson (1960: 356).

⁶ He claims that "the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious'" and it does so "[b]y 'estranging' objects and complicating form" (Shklovsky 1990: 5-6).

⁷ Helmstetter (1995: 34). "By staging 'the word as word,' poetic language draws our attention to the material, structural and relational qualities of the words themselves: the words do not carry their meaning within them; their meanings are assigned to them in speech. When language comes around to itself in poetic form, it loses its transparency with regard to the objects being signified (feelings etc.); it confounds the automatism of signification." (English translation by Claudia Benthien).

Recent debates on the ‘politics’ of the communal space are relevant here. For instance, one might ask if the public sphere is diminished by means of privatization and commercialization or if genuine anonymity, previously one of the defining characteristics of urban life, still exists in an era of heightened video surveillance, security services and police presence. These critical issues have been addressed through numerous acts of public assembly in the recent past.⁸

1. “Poetry in Motion”

This paper consists of five case studies of written or oral poetry in urban space. The first example is the popular project “Poetry in Motion” in the New York City Subway. Poems for this series were (and are) selected by representatives of the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) and the Poetry Society of America.⁹ The subway can be considered a *non-lieu* (‘non-place’), a term coined by the anthropologist Marc Augé to describe public spaces that “cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity.”¹⁰ Non-places are sites of transit, “of anonymous transportation, consumption and entertainment”¹¹: airports, train stations, hotels, shopping malls, and supermarkets, for instance. As Augé notes, such non-places have one common feature, namely “that they are defined partly by the words and texts they offer us: their ‘instructions for use’, which may be prescriptive (‘Take right-hand lane’), prohibitive (‘No smoking’) or informative (‘You are now entering the Beaujolais region’).”¹² Humans, Augé emphasizes, “are supposed to interact only with texts, whose proponents are not individuals but ‘moral entities’ or institutions.” He further comments this “peculiarity” as follows:

All the remarks that emanate from our roads and commercial centres, from the streetcorner sites of the vanguard of the banking system (“Thank you for your cus-

⁸ They also form the central topic of Judith Butler’s “Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,” which investigates new forms of democracy, collectivity, and participation in the public sphere. Butler mentions i.a. the Arab Spring, Occupy Wallstreet, and the anti-precarity demonstrations. Cf. Butler (2015: 7).

⁹ Submissions were/are not accepted, so even though poems are publicly displayed, the project is not ‘democratic.’ The first four poems to appear were “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” by Walt Whitman, “Hope is the Thing with Feathers” by Emily Dickinson, “When You Are Old” by William Butler Yeats, and “Let There Be New Flowering” by Lucille Clifton. Within this selection, Whitman’s long, extravagant poem stands out, as it self-reflexively thematizes both the city it is ‘riding in’ and the movement itself. The MTA website uses this theme for promotional purposes, stating that “It would have pleased Walt Whitman, that poet of urban motion, to envision his words coursing by electrified rail through a diverse, global city of 8 million souls.” Cf. <http://web.mta.info/mta/aft/poetry/> [18/08/2020].

¹⁰ Augé (2006: 77-78).

¹¹ Joselit (1998: 55).

¹² Augé (2006: 96).

tom,” “Bon voyage,” “We apologize for any inconvenience”) are addressed simultaneously and indiscriminately to each and any of us: they fabricate the “average man,” defined as the user of the road, retail or banking system. [...]

[A] person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver. [...]

The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude.¹³

Augé explicitly refers to the transportation system and to highways – non-places, it seems, are often characterized by mobility. Thus, the subway is an example of a non-place in that it facilitates mobility, issues instructions, confronts with ads, and necessitates orientation via maps all while granting passengers a degree of anonymity.



Figure 2: Subway Poem “Train Rising out of the Sea” by John Ashbery with artwork by Monika Bravo from her mosaic installation “Duration” (New York City, 2019).

In the first phase of “Poetry in Motion” (1992-2008), poems appeared on overhead ‘car cards’ at the very spot where one expects to find ads (or next to them). They were placed “under a [...] masthead featuring mosaic tile art from a number of

¹³ Ibid., 100-103.

subway stations,” below the title “SubTalk” and the MTA logo. After a hiatus of four years, the program was relaunched in 2012 under the patronage of the MTA’s Arts & Design section. The poems now appear on larger, “‘premium square’ car cards,” paired with a visual artwork and placed on window level in the cars (Figure 2).¹⁴ It is obvious that the new format not only features a different aesthetic, but also changes the mode of perception. From now on, passengers are confronted with ‘framed’ and visually adorned poetry, which is further de-contextualized from its surroundings. When a passenger sits in front of a poem, others cannot read it. What is more, the presentation resembles a picture on the wall – poetry as decoration, it seems.

One of the recently displayed poems is “Notes On Longing” by Tina Chang:

It smells of after-rain tonight.
 Duck bones, a wounded egg on rice.
 On the corner, there is a shop,
 that makes keys, keys that open
 human doors, doors that lead
 to rooms that hold families
 of four or seven that sit at a table.
 There is a mother who brings
 sizzling flounder on a wide platter
 for the family whose ordinary
 mouths have been made to sing.¹⁵

Chang’s text is exemplary for “Poetry in Motion”: it is short, easy to grasp, and contains an imagery loosely related to riding the subway, for instance, the reference to a street corner shop making keys or the fact that many commuters on the train go home after work for dinner. At the same time, the poem’s title pointedly evokes a sense of longing and nostalgia, particularly where traditional gender roles are concerned, thereby presenting the mother’s role as something ‘unreal,’ something of a bygone era – or an imaginary past, perhaps in an Asian country such as Taiwan, where a part of the author’s family lives. Reading a poem like this one in public, even silently, causes contradictory emotions, not only because it is slightly kitschy, but also because it thematizes personal emotions. From the perspective of social psychology, ‘longing’ is a state of mind subway passengers try to avoid, as the habitus in such situations of anonymity and proximity demands distance and reserve.

At this juncture, it is helpful to refer to Georg Simmel’s notion of the “metropolitan type.”¹⁶ Even though he wrote his article “The Metropolis and Mental Life” more than a century ago, it still offers a valid description of the urban social character. The public space of the city is characterized by a “heterogeneity of

¹⁴ <http://web.mta.info/mta/aft/poetry/history.html> [18/08/2020].

¹⁵ <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-poems-in-the-subway-get-an-exhibit-of-their-own> [18/08/2020].

¹⁶ Simmel (2002: 12).

actors,” by frequent encounters with strangers and by a “spatial density of interactions.”¹⁷ Simmel claims that the urban character “creates a protective organ [...] against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it.”¹⁸ The reactions of the ‘metropolitan type’ are primarily rational, his or her responses are “moved to a sphere of mental activity which is least sensitive and which is furthest removed from the depth of the personality.”¹⁹ According to Simmel, social relations in big cities are functional and segmented. Urbanity, on the one hand, enables individualization but on the other strongly affects human behavior by creating physical and mental distance between urban dwellers.²⁰ Simmel calls this mental state a “protection of the inner life against the domination of the metropolis.”²¹ His characterization of the urban character has recently been applied in particular to the habitus of New Yorkers by Donna Stonecipher, who claims that they “donned their blasé attitudes along with their coats as they left their apartments.”²²



Figure 3: Subway rider in front of “Notes on Longing” by Tina Chang (New York City, 2019).

Poetry in the subway creates disruption, precisely by calling into question this intellectual, distanced persona which is so typical for a global metropolis like New

¹⁷ Häußermann (2005: 238).

¹⁸ Simmel (2002: 12).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Cf. Häußermann (2005: 238).

²¹ Simmel (2002: 12).

²² Cf. Stonecipher (2018: 24).

York City. One might even feel caught or embarrassed when being observed while reading a poem that deals with longing, smell, taste and private life.²³ Correspondingly, one might experience the same when seeing others read the poem – or simply sit in front of it with a bunch of flowers like this melancholic woman (Figure 3). However, most subway riders overlook the poems which reflects the reserve and “blasé attitude” of the *citoyen* described by Simmel: an “incapacity” (or unwillingness) “to react to new stimulations,” as he puts it.²⁴

2. Open Air Poetry Slam

The second example is “Best of Poetry Slam Open Air” (2015). Even though researchers of spoken word and poetry slams apply the notion of ‘public sphere’ to these events,²⁵ one has to admit that a show with an entrance fee of 28 Euros is not accessible to everybody, while the other two features of public space – anonymity and openness – remain, at least to a certain degree. With more than 5,000 visitors, supposedly the largest poetry slam event in history, it took place at the Trabrennbahn (racecourse) in the Bahrenfeld district of Hamburg. The slam was audible far beyond the racecourse within the urban space. During the event, prominent German-language slam poets performed their works, amplified by huge loud speakers. As anyone who has attended a pop concert or a reading of literature in an auditorium knows, it is a paradoxical phenomenon that the human voice evokes intimacy and closeness particularly through electroacoustic technology. The use of microphones de-spatializes and disembodies the voice, which is no longer perceived as emanating from the site of its enunciation, the performer’s body, but rather appears in the form of an “acoustic close-up”²⁶ due to the loudspeakers spread across the stage. This amplification creates a particular kind of acoustic intimacy that may be experienced even outside of the performance space.

One example will suffice in order to illustrate this point, namely Julia Engelmann’s performance of “One Day / Reckoning Text,” a very well-known slam text that is easily recognized as poetry as it contains verse, rhyme and iteration. It deals with *carpe diem*, a popular topic in both Early Modern and contemporary poetry – here an excerpt of this rather long spoken word poem:

„Ach, das mach ich später“
 ist die Baseline meines Alltags
 Ich bin so furchtbar faul
 wie ein Kieselstein am Meeresgrund.
 Ich bin so furchtbar faul,

²³ In sociology, ‘public’ and ‘private’ spaces are distinguished on the functional, juridical, social and symbolic level. Cf. Gestring et al. (2005: 224).

²⁴ Simmel (2002: 14).

²⁵ Cf. Damon (1998: 326-327).

²⁶ „[A]kustische Großaufnahme“ (Pinto 2012: 25; English translation by Claudia Benthien).

mein Patronus ist ein Schweinehund.
 Mein Leben ist ein Wartezimmer,
 niemand ruft mich auf.
 Mein Dopamin – das spar ich immer,
 falls ich's noch mal brauch.²⁷

Hearing these lines, for instance while strolling through the Hamburg Volkspark, elicits once again an unsettling sense of intimacy and subjectivity, a connection with a human voice far away and yet so close. Engelmann's performance evokes a seemingly 'embodied subjectivity' due to similar character traits of the first-person speaker within the text and the visible and audible poet, which leads to a melting of these two levels of subjectivity and creates an 'authenticity effect.'²⁸ In her performance, she employs "numerous emphases"²⁹ that communicate emotional involvement. In the quoted excerpt of this spoken word poem, Engelmann's equation of her life with a *Wartezimmer* ('waiting room') where no one is calling her is particularly significant, as it describes a state of in-betweenness that resonates with the idea of a 'non-place:' a space and state where one waits for a train, a bus, an airplane – or a medical consultation. It is not a space of habitation, but of transit.

3. Jenny Holzer: Light Projections

From the beginning, Jenny Holzer's linguistic involvement in the urban space has produced a strong sense of disruption by presenting seemingly subjective and personal messages in unexpected places, more precisely by adapting their visual presentational mode.³⁰ Holzer began writing and using her "Truisms" in the 1970s, and she continues to exhibit them in various contexts and media – in museums, but frequently also in the public space of large cities. Her texts are not poetry in the strict sense but short phrases or aphorisms whose content and message range from popular, even banal knowledge to reflexive wisdom and political activism. Among the most famous are "PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT" which was displayed at Times Square and "RAISE BOYS AND GIRLS THE SAME WAY" printed e.g., on the hood of a taxi during her exhibition at the Venice Biennale.³¹ Using specific linguistic devices, these short phrases reveal

²⁷ "'Oh, I'll do that later' / is the baseline of my daily routine / I am so terribly lazy / like a pebble stone at the bottom of the sea. / I am so terribly lazy, / My weaker self is my Patronus. / My life is a waiting room, / nobody calls me. / I'll save my dopamine for later, / in case I might need it at some point." (Engelmann: "One Day / Reckoning Text", in: Engelmann 2014: 25; English translation by Claudia Benthien).

²⁸ Cf. Novak (2017: 157-158); also see Benthien / Prange (2020).

²⁹ Novak (2017: 155; English translation by Claudia Benthien).

³⁰ The Holzer passage is an adapted and reworked version taken from Benthien / Lau / Marxsen (2019: 96-98).

³¹ Cf. Joselit (1998: 57 and 63).

“the discursive structure of public signs, advertising and popular media.”³² Holzer often chooses either highly significant places or landmarks of a city, or, on the contrary, non-places in the Augéan sense – e.g. in a Las Vegas show where exhibitions were held at the McCarran International Airport, the Caesars Palace Hotel and the Fashion Show Mall.³³

As stated before, one of the issues this paper is dealing with is the ‘publication’ of poetry (or poetry-like language) as a way of both evoking and questioning notions of ‘lyric subjectivity’. Lyric poetry has traditionally been understood as the ‘subjective genre’ of emotions and sentiments, a persisting view strongly influenced by Hegel,³⁴ who claimed that poetry does not represent “the thing itself” but its “*inner* vision and feeling.”³⁵ According to Hegel, the poet’s “individual subjective life”³⁶ constitutes the theme of the poem and “what he [...] manifests in his portrayal of this material is only the inherent and independent life of his feelings and meditations.”³⁷ Such a “lyricization of poetry” resulted from the “historical transformation of many varied poetic genres into the single abstraction of the post-Romantic lyric.”³⁸ Even though the majority of poems do not fit this characterization, associating poetry with subjectivity remained popular until the 21st century, in particular for a general audience. When Holzer presents speech acts of seeming ‘lyric subjectivity’ in the urban space of contemporary metropolises, this unexpected aesthetic experience induces a moment of disruption: who is, for instance, the ‘I’ speaking about “LOSING TIME” (Figure 4)?



Figure 4: Jenny Holzer: *Arno, Xenon projektion* (Florence, 1996).

³² Hughes (2006: 421-422).

³³ Cf. Joselit (1998: 57).

³⁴ Cf. Culler (2015: 92-101); Benthien / Lau / Marxsen (2019: 119-120).

³⁵ Hegel (1998: 1111).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1114.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1118.

³⁸ Jackson (2008: 183).

Most of Holzer's xenon light projections display texts or single lines written in simple, white, bold, sans-serif, capital letters on buildings and landmarks. During a show at Fondation Beyeler, for example, xenon light projections in German and English were installed in different locations in and around Basel and Zurich. On the opening day of the exhibition, Holzer's work could be experienced on the facade of the Basel city hall. A later projection was set up in the Zurich neighborhood of Lindenhof, illuminating the Limmat River, a water sports club and part of the old city wall (Figure 5). Thus, the gigantic light script embraced different elements of the city, creating new performative meaning that was constantly in motion and perceivable only in the present tense. Presenting her work at the market place, at the city hall and in the proximity of the main church, Holzer chose significant locations, emblematic of the socio-spatial organization of the traditional European city with its medieval origins.³⁹ Contrary to this, her signature U.S. location, Times Square in New York City, is a hotspot of advertisements, news and turbo capitalism.⁴⁰ Whereas in 'old' European cities, the projections add a strong element of alienation and contrast, in the U.S. metropolises, the modern and fleeting aesthetic of Holzer's script-based artworks is easily integrated into the existing sign culture and thus rather creates a sensation of alienation on the level of content.



Figure 5: Jenny Holzer: "For Zurich," Xenon projection (Zurich, 2009).

³⁹ Cf. Siebel (2004: 11-50).

⁴⁰ On the sociological distinctions between European and U.S.-American cities, see Häußermann (2005).

For the Swiss installations, Holzer combines “Truisms” with poetry written by the Nobel Laureate Wisława Szymborska and the poet Henry Cole. The “Truisms” ambiguity creates a literary effect by using a language that is “by careful design, already unstable – [...] a language that is free-floating, polysemous and inherently ambiguous.”⁴¹ Language acquires an even more ambiguous nature when Holzer’s texts are combined with poetry. Both text types are presented in the same font; there is no visual distinction. One of the poems projected in the Zurich installation, for instance, is Szymborska’s “In Praise of Feeling Bad about Yourself” (“Pochwała złęgo o sobie mniemania”, 1976):

The buzzard never says it is to blame.
The panther wouldn’t know what scruples mean.
When the piranha strikes, it feels no shame.
If snakes had hands, they’d claim their hands were clean.

A jackal doesn’t understand remorse.
Lions and lice don’t waver in their course.
Why should they, when they know they’re right?

Though hearts of killer whales may weigh a ton,
in every other way they’re light.

On this third planet of the sun
among the signs of bestiality
a clear conscience is Number One.⁴²

While Holzer’s conceptual art creates disruption and a perplexing ‘personal appeal’ through her frequent use of the first and second person singular, Szymborska’s poem evokes the opposite effect through the author’s deliberate avoidance of those pronouns in favor of an anonymous ‘they.’ Moreover, this poem refers to numerous exotic animals which form a stark contrast to what is factually there in the city center. At the same time, it speaks about fundamental, yet uncomfortable, human feelings: guilt, scruples, shame and remorse.

When projected on elements of the cityscape, Holzer’s and Szymborska’s interlaced lines aestheticize their surroundings, both commenting on and appropriating them. Whatever the light touches instantly becomes part of the public artwork, only to disappear from sight again when the projection moves on. Projection and city enter into a mutual exchange, an interplay of the illuminated and illuminating script, the spatial surrounding, the situative context, the use of media, and the performative reception processes.⁴³ Words are literally ‘projected’ on objects, exposing the arbitrary connection between signifiers and signified. Instead of ‘attaching’ meaning to

⁴¹ Hughes (2006: 426).

⁴² Szymborska (2010: 114). Holzer used this poem both in a project in Frankfurt/Main, Germany, and in the Swiss project discussed here.

⁴³ Cf. Lehmann (2002: 265).

things by naming them, the script itself is blurred and becomes difficult or even impossible to read when projected on uneven surfaces or, as in Zurich, on water:

Thus presented, the image unfolds its own attraction, as though the word were its concern alone. [...] The question of perception focuses us on the content, and the search for a message confronts us with the form.⁴⁴

This aesthetic experience is heightened due to the public display of poetic language whose source and authorship remain ambiguous.

4. The “avenidas” debate

The fourth case study concerns a debate on a ‘concrete poem’ in the double meaning of the word: Eugen Gomringer’s “avenidas,” visible until recently on a building of the Alice Salomon Hochschule, a Berlin college of education. In 2011, Gomringer’s Spanish poem was painted in giant letters on the southern front of the college, in order to honor one of the founders of concrete poetry and recipient of the school’s annual poetics prize⁴⁵:

avenidas
avenidas y flores

flores
flores y mujeres

avenidas
avenidas y mujeres

avenidas y flores y mujeres y
un admirador⁴⁶

In 2016, the college’s student organization (AStA) complained that those eight plain lines, written in 1953 as the first so-called ‘Konstellationsgedicht’ (‘constellation poem’) by the Bolivian-Swiss poet, represented an outdated image of women and did not correspond to the college’s present-day self-understanding. The school administration’s response to invite student suggestions for a new exterior design resulted in a heated, even absurd debate in the German features section on sexism and the freedom of artistic expression. The German State Min-

⁴⁴ Werner (2010: 24).

⁴⁵ It is an award for “artists who have contributed to the further development of the literary, visual or acoustic arts through special stylistic idioms and diversity while working in an interdisciplinary manner and having an interdisciplinary effect”.
<https://www.ash-berlin.eu/en/about-ash-berlin/profile/awards/> [18/08/2020].

⁴⁶ “avenues / avenues and flowers // flowers / flowers and women // avenues / avenues and women // avenues and flowers and women and / an admirer” (English translation by Claudia Benthien).

ister for Culture Monika Grütters spoke of an „erschreckenden Akt der Kulturbarbarei“⁴⁷ (a ‘shocking act of cultural barbarism’). Political correctness, Grütters argued, should never undermine the freedom of art and culture. By calling this „eine der wichtigsten Lehren aus der Geschichte“ (‘one of the most important lessons from history’), she implicitly associated the school’s administration with the Nazi regime in its exclusion of ‘degenerated’ art.⁴⁸

The poet Esther Dischereit argued against Grütters’ claim, stating that the freedom of art was granted through the initial act of publication. „Jetzt aber“, she writes, „will die Hochschule [...] das Gedicht zuklappen, wegtun von der Fassade, gewissermaßen zurück ins Buch“ – in a figurative sense, the college wants to ‘close’ the poem, to put it back into the book. Dischereit further elaborates the book-wall analogy by arguing that the ‘wall poem,’ contrary to the ‘book poem,’ is part of public space – a space of change where some simply do not want to read such a text on a daily basis or accept the “gesture of this gentlemen, his jovial attitude towards women” any longer. She emphasizes the changing self-image of women, of people in general who “neither relate to women or men” in such a way and concludes by contrasting “the freedom of art” with the “freedom of opinion and of writing in public space” by asking: “Why should only the poet write on the public space? To whom does this space belong?”⁴⁹

After a long debate and notwithstanding the ongoing polemics, the college reached a compromise: the southern front of the building was to be redesigned every five years with a different poem by a poetics prize laureate. Gomringer’s work, however, was to be engraved on a small steel plate on the wall.⁵⁰ This change was implemented in late 2018. Now, Gomringer’s poem is set in steel at

⁴⁷ Cf. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/fassadenstreit-in-berlin-gruetters-bezeichnet-uebermalung-von-gedicht-als-kulturbarbarei/20885268.html> [18/08/2020].

⁴⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴⁹ „Die Freiheit der Kunst, die ist ja gegeben. Der Dichter konnte schreiben, was er wollte. Er konnte es publizieren, und es hat keiner verboten. [...] Jetzt aber will die Hochschule für Soziale Arbeit das Gedicht zuklappen, wegtun von der Fassade, gewissermaßen zurück ins Buch. Das ist eigentlich nichts Schlimmes. Die Bücher sind handlicher und man kann in dem Lesefluß bleiben, der für den oder die Lesenden der richtige ist. [...] Mit der Fassade verhält es sich anders. Hier steht das Gedicht im öffentlichen Raum. Andere wollen davon jetzt nicht mehr gespielt werden. Sie wollen diesen Text nicht täglich lesen. Manche spricht er nicht an, oder nicht mehr, andere fühlen hier diese Geste des Herrn, dessen joviale Art gegenüber der Frau. Da hat sich das Selbstbild der Frauen inzwischen geändert, bis hin in den Sprachgebrauch hinein. Und nicht nur der Frauen, auch aller Menschen, die sich in dieser Weise weder ihnen noch den Männern zuordnen. [...] Von diesen Dingen hat die sich aufregende Kunstwelt offenbar entweder nichts gehört oder es interessiert sie nicht oder es wird als übertriebener Quatsch empfunden. | Die Freiheit der Kunst gegenüber der Freiheit der Meinung und des Schreibens im öffentlichen Raum. Warum sollte überhaupt nur der oder die Dichtende den öffentlichen Raum beschreiben? Wem gehört dieser Raum?“ (Dischereit 2018; English translation by Claudia Benthien).

⁵⁰ Cf. <https://www.ash-berlin.eu/hochschule/organisation/referat-hochschulkommunikation/pressespiegel-fassadendebatte/> [18/08/2020].

the bottom of the wall, together with a comment by Gomringer and a note by Barbara Köhler, whose poem written for this occasion was the first to replace Gomringer's (Figure 6), as well as a link to a website documenting the debate. Köhler's poem also contains eight lines in four short stanzas, thus overwriting that of Gomringer in a spatial notion too, as the title of her note, „Überschreibung“ also emphasizes:

SIE BEWUNDERN SIE
BEZWEIFELN SIE ENTSCHIEDEN:

SIE WIRD ODER WERDEN GROSS
ODER KLEIN GESCHRIEBEN SO

STEHEN SIE VOR IHNEN
IN IHRER SPRACHE

WÜNSCHEN SIE IHNEN
BON DIA GOOD LUCK



Figure 6: Southern front of Alice Salomon Hochschule with Barbara Köhler's poem (2018).

Köhler stressed that the poem she ‘donated’ to the college was written “to move the debate possibly in another direction” and, at the same time, to “lead it *ad absurdum*.”⁵¹ She furthermore claimed to have woven individual letters of “avenidas” into her poem. In her public note at the bottom of the wall, the poet comments:

Ein Gedicht mit Vorgeschichte: ein Gedicht an einem Ort, an dem davor ein anderes Gedicht stand, um das eine Geschichte entstand, die sehr verschieden erzählt wurde – als öffentliche Debatte. Was eigentlich passt, weil auch der Ort ein öffentlicher ist. Das neue Gedicht ist ein Teil dieser Geschichte, es macht nicht Schluss damit, nur eine weitere Schicht: aus dem Gedicht davor ist ein Gedicht dahinter geworden. Durch die Schrift lässt sich in die Zeit sehen: das Aktuelle erinnert das Vorherige, nimmt es auf, löscht es nicht aus. An einem Ort, sagt das Gedicht so, kann’s mehr als eines geben oder einen; möglich ist vieles – Wohin erinnern Sie sich? Wofür und wem geben Sie Raum? Und wer, sagen Sie, hätte nichts zu sagen? Das Gedicht wendet sich an die Öffentlichkeit, an die Vielen, die den Ort täglich passieren: es begrüßt sie ausdrücklich, es gäbe ihnen gern Verschiedenes zu denken. Und sollte Ihnen daran etwas Spanisch vorkommen und so nicht korrekt, könnte es sich vielleicht auch um eine andere Sprache handeln – Katalanisch z. B.?⁵²

In this comment, Köhler plays with the verb *sagen*, in her poem likewise with the ambiguity of the German word *Sie/sie* (both formal address and pronoun, both singular and plural). She also grants subjectivity to the poem as an entity, which seems to be speaking in the same manner as its readers. The meaning of the line „SIE BEWUNDERN SIE / BEZWEIFELN SIE ENTSCHIEDEN:“ (‘you admire you doubt you decide’) remains ambiguous since the second *sie* could either be the object of the verb *bewundern* (to admire) or the subject of the verb *bezweifeln* (to doubt). In the following stanza, „SIE WIRD ODER WERDEN GROSS / ODER KLEIN GESCHRIEBEN SO“ (‘she will [singular] or will [plural] be written in capital or lower case letters like this’), the *Sie/sie* suddenly turns from singular to plural and, in another twist, refers to the poem’s letters and to the fact that this poem, contrary to Gomringer’s lower case, uses exclusively capital letters. Köhler’s poem even claims about its own letters, „STEHEN SIE VOR IHNEN / IN IHRER SPRACHE“ (‘they stand before you in their/your language’), wishing you “BON DIA GOOD LUCK”. Thus, the poem receives agency, directly addressing the reader in the urban

⁵¹ „Ich habe den Vorschlag gemacht, der Hochschule ein Gedicht zu schenken, um eine Debatte, die nach meinem Dafürhalten gründlich schief lief, womöglich in eine andere Richtung zu bewegen, sie vielleicht ein bisschen *ad absurdum* zu führen.“ (Köhler 2018).

⁵² <https://www.ash-berlin.eu/hochschule/presse-und-newsroom/news/news/barbara-koehlers-gedicht-auf-suedfassade-der-alice-salomon-hochschule-berlin/> [18/08/2020] (“A poem with a history: a poem at a site where another poem once stood, around which a story unfolded, which was told in very different ways – as a public debate. [...] [T]he poem in front has turned into a poem behind. Through the script, one may perceive time: the present commemorates what was before, it incorporates but does not extinguish it. At one place, the poem likewise says, there can be more than one [thing or person]; many things are possible. – What do you remember? For what and whom do you give room [*Raum geben*, implying both a literal and a figurative sense]? And who, do you say, would have nothing to say?”; English translation by Claudia Benthien).

space of Berlin in its final stanza, and concluding in two foreign languages. However, in Köhler's intervention, as multi-layered as it is, the controversial feminist debate initiated by Gomringer's poem is latent: it is neither there nor fully absent. Nevertheless, one must conclude that Köhler enabled a thought-provoking encounter with 'public poetry' and its negotiations in an urban setting.

5. From „augenpost“ to “#audiblepoetry”

The final case study focuses on the poet and performer Ulrike Almut Sandig, who executed an urban poetry intervention in Leipzig called „augenpost“ ('eye-mail') from 2001 to 2004. Once a month, Sandig, together two peers, Marlen Pelny and Dorit Horn, walked through the city, hung poetry on lamp posts, walls, traffic lights, electrical boxes and doors, and also handed them out as flyers and postcards to passers-by.⁵³ The women also gave readings in the streets of Leipzig, which they called „ohrenpost“ ('ear-mail').⁵⁴ In addition, Sandig posted two texts with questions such as the following:

Bleibst du stehen oder gehst du weiter? Und weißt du, wie du stehst? Kennst du den Ort, wo du jetzt hingehst und willst du dahin? Bist du entschlossen? Und warst du schon alt? Bist du online und kannst du mich riechen? Hast du gesehen, wie Spinnen aus den Stromkästen kriechen und Netze in die Ampeln spannen? Und quer über die Brücken im Park? Was tust du, wenn die Ampel auf grau springt?⁵⁵

Readers took these questions seriously and wrote their answers next to the poems (Figure 7) – or posted them on the project's website. Although it is, strictly speaking, not poetry, this set of questions is remarkable in two ways: first, the reader is addressed as a perceiving, singular subject by questions articulated from a first-person perspective. Even though it asks such personal questions, the speaker or writer remains intangible. Second, the final question undoubtedly turns this text into literature, even poetry, due to its unexpected poetic deviation from the well-known German phrase *die Ampel springt auf grün*. Since the color adjectives *grau* and *grün* obviously share formal features, the shift is minimal but effective: contrary to green, grey is a non-color; it symbolizes boredom, monotony, an emotionless state.

⁵³ Cf. Johnson (2018: 279).

⁵⁴ They also extended the publicly displayed works into the digital realm by creating an interactive Flash website, which allowed for online encounters – the site as well as the poet's name was written on the bottom of the poem posters. Cf. Johnson (2018: 280).

⁵⁵ Sandig (2002). (“Do you stop or walk on? And do you know how you stand [or, figuratively: do you know what your opinion is]? Do you know the place you are heading to and do you want to go there? Are you determined? And were you already old? Are you online and can you smell me? Have you seen how spiders crawl out of the junction boxes and weave nets in the traffic lights? And across the bridges in the park? What do you do if the traffic light turns grey?”; English translation by Claudia Benthien).



Figure 7: Ulrike Almut Sandig:
„Territorium“ from „augenpost“ (Leipzig, 2001-2004).

According to Rebecca May Johnson, „augenpost“ followed a tradition of anti-establishment artistic practices aimed at reaching an audience that usually did not read or listen to poetry. Johnson remarks that Sandig’s intervention

calls on residents to reflect on the urban environment and materials, opening up spaces for reflection on the relationship between nature and pollution, as well as love and urban alienation at the traffic lights while waiting to cross the road. As *Der Spiegel* reports, members of the public also interacted critically with the work, correcting grammar, adding insults and writing poems in response on the paper posters.⁵⁶

In Johnson’s view, „augenpost“ can be traced back to the artistic-political practices of 1968, for instance the Situationist International movement and publications such as Henri Lefebvre’s manifesto “The Right to the City.” Lefebvre insists on the right of city inhabitants to create urban life and thus to transform themselves politically.⁵⁷ Moreover, he writes that

[t]he city historically constructed is no longer lived and understood practically. It is only an object of cultural consumption for tourists, for aestheticism, avid for spectacles and the picturesque. [...] Yet, the *urban* remains in a state of dispersed and alienated actuality, as kernel and virtuality.⁵⁸

Lefebvre understood this “crisis of the traditional city”⁵⁹ as a chance for renewal and activism, as a utopian site.⁶⁰ In the 1960s, sociologists such as Jürgen Habermas developed an emphatic notion of *bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit* (bourgeois public sphere) as a democratic space free from economic and political control.⁶¹ “[A]ugenpost” reflects this notion. One should also highlight the fact that the poems were placed precisely in locations where one expects to find public announcements (or

⁵⁶ Johnson (2018: 280).

⁵⁷ Cf. Johnson (2018: 284).

⁵⁸ Lefebvre (2000: 148).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁶⁰ “To exercise a right to the city is also to politically de-alienate the urban subject who necessarily reshapes the urban environment as part of that de-alienation.” (Johnson 2018: 284).

⁶¹ Cf. Häußermann / Siebel (2004: 62).

private housing requests). Distributing flyers and postcards also refers both to practices of advertising and political activity. The actions taken by Sandig and her peers were situated between the realms of consumer culture and politics. Once again, the “presence of the literary,” as Eagleton puts it, became dominant in and through an unexpected context.

In 2019, Sandig performed what she calls *#hörbaredichtung* (or *#audiblepoetry*), an urban poetry intervention, in two Indian metropolises of the so-called “Global South,”⁶² Delhi and Calcutta. The events included poetry readings at street corners and subway exits and in front of food stalls. Apart from Sandig, participants of a workshop she gave at the Goethe Institute (Max Mueller Bhavan) and Indian German language students read poetry and other short texts. Sandig informed the participants beforehand about the three most important points in her opinion for her: that ‘words create reality;’ that a suitable text would be a poem or story they believe to be strong enough ‘to add something’ that is missing to the city; and that the text should be short, audible, and preferably in a language spoken in India.⁶³

With these remarks, the poet conceptualizes her work in public space as a form of healing the city of its lacking poeticity, a quality of language that not only sounds artistic but also needs to be understood by larger groups of inhabitants. Here is an excerpt of “from the wings,” one of the poems read by Sandig herself in English translated by Karen Leeder:

[...] in the beginning there’s no one.
 in the land of beginning I lay
 screaming. in the end I lie silent,
 bearing a ribbon with white writing
 that streams behind me. what’s on it?
 in the beginning, the end, the same
 vowel and always, always lying
 you hear my beginning. [...]
 I am made wholly of language
 I am this wild vowel of origin
 the defining feature of
 my lost kind that must speak
 to understand themselves. [...]⁶⁴

Sandig performed “from the wings” and other poems using a megaphone for instance at Connaught Place, New Delhi’s central shopping square and one of the largest financial, commercial and business centers in India, which was established in the colonial era (Figure 8). The sound volume does not fit the words, just as the words do not fit the anonymous urban surrounding; they are enigmatic, subjective, even physical. As emphasized by Dieter Burdorf, a distinctive feature of poetry is that it is “addressing the reader directly” because of “the structural dominance of

⁶² Sennett (2017: 428).

⁶³ Cf. Ulrike Almut Sandig, e-mail to Claudia Benthien, March 4, 2019.

⁶⁴ Sandig (ca. 2018).

personal pronouns, especially those of first and second person.”⁶⁵ In Sandig’s case, this seeming subjectivity is further emphasized through a text that equates the speaker with the words spoken, leading to the poetological claim that the self is “made wholly of language” and that the addressed “you” is able to hear its “beginning.” It is through this verbal interchange between speaker and audience that the ‘poetic function’ dominates in Sandig’s lines.⁶⁶ The fact that a poem like hers was not only read aloud, but also proclaimed in high volume and thus ‘published,’ like a political protest, causes a strong sense of disruption.



Figure 8: Ulrike Almut Sandig: #audiblepoetry (New Delhi, 2019).

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined different forms of ‘public poetry’ in urban space – some meant to be read, others to be heard. Such a performative use of poetry is unsettling, calling for attention and allowing the recipient to pause and reflect, if only for a moment. It is the literariness of poetic language that causes deautomatization as it is presented in places and formats where one would expect advertisements, information or the expression of political protest. As an aesthetic intervention, public poetry either appears in significant sites of cities – a town hall, the riverside of a specific city, a racecourse and its surrounding public park, a college entrance – or, on the contrary, in non-places, sites of transit, such as the subway, a shopping area or a street corner. In all these urban places and sites, passers-by, characterized by a mental habitus of distance and self-protection, expect to read pragmatic texts.

⁶⁵ Burdorf (1997: 21; English translation by Claudia Benthien).

⁶⁶ “[A] poetic work cannot be defined as a work fulfilling neither an exclusively aesthetic function nor an aesthetic function along with other functions; rather, a poetic work is defined as a verbal message whose aesthetic function is its dominant.” (Jakobson 1987: 43).

Encountering the lyric in urban space questions this *persona* by means of ambiguous language and in particular by directly addressing the reader or listener. It allows one to stumble over the words and to reflect on one's relationship to contemporary city life, its anonymity and practicality, its demand for indifference and reserve.⁶⁷

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