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Wi: Journal of Mobile Media 2015 9:02

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://doi.org/10.65968/YECW1290>

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From the Ear to the Eye. Conditions of a “Localized Writing” Experiment

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Abstract

Murmures Urbains is an artistic project that builds on *Messages Situés*, a platform devised and developed by Orbe. It offers a “soundwalk” delivering instructions to the spectator in a given space. The spectator is free to complete the actions proposed in the context of a protocol. Depending on the writing of the protocol, the instructions allow the spectator to play with social norms. The spectator oscillates between immersive phases (when he is cut off from the surrounding sound environment), and relational phases. Instructions offer him the opportunity to create his own story. What is the role of the spectator? Could he be a performer?

Murmures Urbains is an artistic and experimental project based on *Messages Situés*, a platform devised and developed by Orbe. *Messages Situés* can deliver audio content on smartphones through a Web protocol, based on various conditions such as: geolocation, time, logical conditions, and synchronization with other Web content. All of these conditions could be combined, thus providing some opportunities for rich writing.

Murmures Urbains is devoted to gaining a better understanding of how *Messages Situés* can become a “writing machine” for live performance, e.g for writing in public

spaces and stage writing for the performing arts. Equipped with a smartphone, the spectator hears localized instructions. He is free to execute them, and above all, he is free to interpret the instructions as he pleases. At the start of the project, the effects of the “apparatus” – the set of possible actions and internalized constraints produced by the audio content and applied to the body of the spectator – were unknown.

This article explores the conditions of a localized writing that prioritizes determination through the sense of hearing over sight. The title of the article is directly inspired by the French translation of a book by Marshall McLuhan, entitled *Essays (Processus and Media)*, published in 1977 under the title *D'Oeil à oreille (La nouvelle galaxie)*.

Exploring the area

Murmures Urbains inspires the spectator to act within the parameters of a set of pre-existing action protocols, based on audio instructions, in a given space. The writing of an experience based on localized sounds therefore demands thorough work within the designated area to reach a certain “relational relevance” between the sounds and the time and place of their playback. So, there are two possibilities. Either the author relies on his knowledge of the area, or else he thwarts his own *a priori* to put himself in a state permitting him to explore the dimensions of the area (such as gaps and fractal dimensions) that are usually imperceptible. This writing modality takes place within the area of the experience. Through *Messages Situés*, the author may submit himself to a

protocol permitting him go beyond his own knowledge of the area and his first intentions. During a 2013 workshop at Chalon-sur-Saône with the FAI_AR,¹ one of four groups of apprentices chose a color to lead their experience: blue. Their exploration is built around this unique perception filter. The result was so rich that they have taken the initiative to build a protocol destined for public use.

The apparatus hybridizes the sound media and its environment of expression. The town is a variable, fractal and unpredictable space. This urban material is difficult to control. There are two ways to implement a sound experience in the public space: the first, the classical linear script through which the author intends to control the soundwalk; the second, an open protocol, creating the conditions of the experience without anticipating the details of its development. In this second approach, the spectator writes his own story. It is a “post-narration.”

How to write a protocol

In *Murmures Urbains*, the spectator can carry out all the proposed actions with a protocol in a given space. He can also choose not to perform them. Instructions are linked to the protocol by some conditions. They are linked together (by logical links "OR" and "AND"), or linked to the area by geolocalized tags. All the audio contents are

¹ La Formation Avancée Itinérante des Arts de la Rue (FAI_AR), located in Marseille.

pre-recorded. There is no remote intervention. Once launched, the experience takes place in full autonomy, according to the choices and actions of the spectator.



Fig. 1: *Murmures Urbains* à Chalon-sur-Saône (F) / 20140226.

The goal of the protocol is to lead the spectator to a destination: a playful or performative situation. One of the stumbling blocks of this method of writing is that an instruction might be considered as a “destination” in itself. For example, by "musicalizing" the instructions, the spectator's attention focuses on the sound and not on its immediate environment. Thus, we have observed best results when using recordings that are simple enough to not draw the experimenter's attention.

Murmures Urbains fits into a context where artistic projects using a sound environment to explore the public space are multiplying (see O'Rourke 2013). Unlike most of these projects, *Messages Situés* modifies the spectator's position.



Fig. 2: *Murmures Urbains* à Chalon-sur-Saône (F) / 20140226.

In Janet Cardiff's *Ghost Machine* (2005), for example, the spectator is equipped with a headset and a camera, and is seated facing the entrance of a theater. On the screen of the camera, the spectator sees what happened in the same place a few days before. After a few minutes, a camera movement occurs encouraging the spectator's body to be set in

motion. The screen leads the spectator, while the sound environment accentuates the disjunction between two types of vision. The contrast between the perception of a past and a present reality is the subject of the play, which takes spectators into the theater's wings, a theater inhabited by ghosts. The spectator is in immersion. But, in Cardiff's play, the story was written in advance. Conversely, in *Murmures Urbains*, the spectator's experience is largely unpredictable. It is written with the apparatus. The objective, then, is to produce a sufficiently immersive situation, so that the spectator can produce his own fiction without neutralizing reality, this principle is essential for walking in the urban space. The work consists in playing with these two cursors, thus generating different types of experiences.

Transgressive game

The first type of experience we tested was based on transgression of the norm in the public space. The idea of using *Messages Situés* as an artistic writing machine was tested for the first time in Villeneuve-lez-Avignon (France, April 2012), at La Chartreuse, as a part of the probe 04 # 12.² The project undertook to confront different art forms (theater and arts in public space) with principals based on video games. More specifically, it was about testing theatrical conventions using video game codes. In the video game, the rules are revealed during the game. In Orbe's *Dérives protocolaires*,

² The Probe 04#12, *Si loin si proche – Videogame, Theater, Public Space*, produced by Emmanuel Guez, in collaboration with Christian Gariat, in the Centre National des Ecritures du Spectacle, la Chartreuse de Villeneuve-lez-Avignon, with the FAI_AR, Paris 8 University, and supported by EU-FEDER and the LABEX H-2H. Following this proposition, several experimental projects were performed by Orbe: at Saint-Etienne (Jean-Monnet University), Montpellier (Kawenga), Avignon (School of Art) and Aix-en-Provence (Seconde Nature).

foreshadowing *Murmures Urbains*, the rules are revealed by the apparatus, which invites the spectator to play with social norms, rules and regulations of the place. Public space is a regulated space, but also a variable space where it is possible to introduce a game that upsets habits or conventions. The spectator does not transgress the law; immersion in the game depends on questioning the norm, not the law. At La Chartreuse, the spectator was systematically placed in the position of the performer. From a dramaturgical point of view, the spectator is not emancipated by a play that pulls him into a fictional world. He himself is freed within the existing world by becoming a performer himself, playing with social conventions and habits. Here, the artistic context of the performance is generated by the protocol and the occasion is provided by the apparatus.

Immersive game (or “dizzy game”)

One of the writing methods explored in *Murmures Urbains* consists of establishing an empathic relationship to the environment through the protocol. For example, during the experiment in Chalon-sur-Saône, the spectator was led, little by little, into an industrial wasteland. At the end of the protocol, an instruction asked him to find a nuclear bomb. Here, the disadvantage of this type of protocol is that it might be experienced as a treasure hunt. The feedback showed, however, that the spectators experienced a real exploration of a territory. Under certain conditions, such a protocol enhances the immersive aspect of the experience.

These conditions are:

- the fluid progression of the protocol, tending to make the smartphone interface invisible;
- the relevance of the instructions regarding the situation;
- keeping the spectator in the least reflexive state of consciousness possible (similar to vertigo);
- neutralizing the projection of consciousness.

By neutralizing the spectator's ability to project himself, we induce a effect of "presence" and increased attention of the spectator. This protocol encourages the development of empathy with the urban environment. The walk is therefore relatively well controlled by the author of the instructions. But, obviously, in this case, the spectator might think that the voice is trying to manipulate him ("to turn him into a guinea pig"). To avoid this feeling, it is necessary to focus the instruction on the action while giving the possibility of interpretation. This type of protocol could be a good complement to the transgression protocol. In any case, it is ideal to provoke a non-utilitarian and non-projective relation to the world in the spectator's consciousness. The spectator can play to lose, can be carried away: the natural mechanism of projection and orientation put to sleep, to try out another way of being in the world.

On the edge effects

There is a third type of protocol, written with instructions that involve a greater degree of interpretation. For example, in Chalon-sur-Saône, a protocol proposed the repetition of audio content in the public space – singing aloud, etc. The audience was prepared by

some staging. The drama came to compensate a much more fragile immersive offer. In this case, the spectator is more of an interpreter than a performer. His actions and walking are not really controlled in this type of protocol. The risk of making a mistake in regard to the planned walk is high. In Aix-en-Provence, a spectator who had to follow someone in costume made a journey of 1 hour and 30 minutes instead of the 20 minutes provided by the author of the instructions.



Fig. 3: *Murmures Urbains* à Chalon-sur-Saône (F) / 20140226.

With these protocols, the reflexive and calculating dimension is enhanced, but in a particular way. Compared to other types of experiences, this protocol causes the least empathy with the environment and with others. These protocols lead the spectator

switch back-and-forth between instructions and perceived reality. The spectator is forced to develop strategies to perform the protocol. Here, the game does not run in a system with fixed rules (a series of axioms), but in its secondary effects, between objective reality and immersive reality. To stay in immersion, the spectator has to shift his intentional, rational and perspectival attitude. Enjoyment of the game comes from the alternation between the hyper attention required by the protocol and the state of mind that the spectator would have on a walk down the street.

Post-narrative and the play space

Murmures Urbains does not offer a scripted device. Thus, the spectator goes through a series of situations that go to make up his story, at the whim of his interpretation, given the instructions he receives. The “frame” and the text of the play (in the dramatic sense) only appear at the end, the video recording of the experience becomes an important issue and, also, a problem: how is it possible to capture the experience without disturbing the experience? What point of view should be adopted? How is it possible to report the audience’s story?

In Aix-en-Provence, in October 2013, we suggested that the spectator tell his story after the experience. The text of the piece was composed with the notes written directly after the experience. This is a dramatic reversal in the process of playwriting. Unlike conventional theater, the text is written after the play and not before. The play does not

exist before it is played by the spectator himself. Recording by writing the story told by a witness, the writer is like a “public writer”³, and thus the author of the instructions and the spectator are both authors of the text.

In February 2014, in Chalon-sur-Saône, we focused on the question of video recording. Some recordings were subjective (with a Go-Pro camera). We also asked the audience (like in Aix-en-Provence) to outline their walk orally. Finally, the FAI_ARs apprentices tried to systematically record the spectators. The space of the recording was obviously a question. The problem, or dramaturgical challenge, of how to deal with the spectator’s body during the recording of his narrative in such a way to make it possible for him to assimilate his own position has not been easy to solve. The best option was to capture the stories in the theatrical space itself, on the stage.

Naturally, the post-narration space became the space of the play. Returning from their experience, the spectators met each other on the stage, where the artists collected their words. On the stage, the voices intertwined, producing a real sound creation. The enclosed theater space became the space of production, a sound environment composed from the spectators’ stories. In this place where the voice of textuality must conventionally be clear, the murmurs of the town became multiple, mixed and undifferentiated once again.

³ *Écrivain public* – a writer that illiterate members of the public call upon when they need to write a document.

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Biographies

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