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7 Cities in 7 Minutes: A feminine paradigm of sensory art

Abstract

This paper explores the eight years in making the multisensory installation *Streets of... 7 Cities in 7 Minutes*, which uncovers the ancestral memories of three intersecting historical journeys (the Indian-European migrations, the Silk Road and the Transatlantic Slave Trade) as they unconsciously resurface in people's everyday life across the globe. The installation reflects the artist's deep interest in the intersection between bodies, memories, urban space, and digital environments. It was presented in London and internationally as an experiential artwork composed of seven immersive environments made up of digital sounds and images, smells, tastes and artefacts of the places. By observing the role played by the body as 'place in time', the author reflects on the feminine paradigm of sensory cultural analysis in which the artwork is inscribed, as well as its role in the design of a hybrid space in which digital recordings, sensory perceptions and embodied cultural practices effectively challenge accepted stereotypical representations of 'others'.

Introduction

The intersection between bodies, memories, urban space, and digital environments has always been crucial in my artistic research and practice. However, it is only in the past few years that I have become increasingly aware of the importance of reflecting on the feminine paradigm of sensory cultural analysis in which I have instinctively inscribed my creative projects. This has run parallel with the need to insert my activist practice and historical research on cultural diversity in the performing arts within the wider framework of critical heritage studies and sensorial urbanism. In this paper I will explore the dynamic interaction between my artistic production and cultural analysis by observing the role played by the body as 'place in time', through the lenses of an artwork, which I organically developed over a period of eight years. In particular, I will discuss how the design of the digital/physical space of the installation has taken into account sensory perceptions and embodied cultural practices to constitute an effective way of challenging accepted stereotypical representations of the cities represented including actants often excluded from them. I will take a stance against sensory hierarchies, which have traditionally privileged the visual over the perceptual, to explore a new aesthetics based on an 'ethics of sensation, materiality, and the body' (Ince, 1996: 132). This will allow me to position my artistic practice within the critical perspective of a feminist discourse on the body, which is central to my attempt to redefine the concept of objectivity of an 'omnivorous' recording camera, as I subsumed my faculty of seeing to the other senses during the creative process. This 'new epistemological project', which Donna Haraway calls 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1988), has implications which have only started to disclose their potential to me. Hence my request to the reader to bear with my reluctance at providing a definitive and cogently argued analysis, and make do with a perceptual set of reflections on the making of the artwork

and its audience reception.

The Multisensory Installation

Streets of... 7 cities in 7 minutes is the result of a research process focused on the observation and extraction of memes, that is units of cultural ideas, symbols or practices transmitted from one person to another through speech, gestures and rituals as described by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Indeed, at the time of developing my second piece *Streets of Mumbai* in 2006, I was aware of the existence of the field of studies called memetics, but had no interest in any biological and evolutionary underlying meaning that could be associated to my work. I was interested in the everyday life of people historically connected by three migration journeys: the Indo-European migration, the Silk Road and the Transatlantic Slave Trade and so, between 2004 and 2012 I travelled between London and Naples (Italy), Mumbai (India), Salvador de Bahia (Brazil), Tangier (Morocco), Shanghai (China), and Lisbon (Portugal), to unearth the hidden connections amongst these cultures. Yet, as the city of Mumbai offered itself to be apprehended through my senses, I started categorizing visual and aural elements from the streets in units of movement and units of sound. This was of great help in the process of orienting myself within this new physical environment, and sowed the seeds for a system that became pivotal to editing the digital material recorded in the streets. During my travels I configured the concept of sensorial urbanism as a 'navigation mode', a safe strategy to explore the seven cities included in the project. The concept takes inspiration from the critical body of work developed by architects, anthropologists and cultural historians such as Joseph Rykwert, David Howes, and Constance Classen increasingly shifting the predominance of the eye in urban studies towards an interdisciplinary approach embracing the whole range of sensorial phenomena and perceptual capacities. At the same time this 'navigation mode' I adopted in my work drew on the power of the senses to connect to and evoke memories (Annett, 1996: 309-319; Miranda et al, 2003: 211-222).

The artwork which eventually emerged from the process was presented as a live art event and multisensory installation made up of seven units, each representing a different city, immersing the audience in a virtual reality of the distinguishing sounds, images, tactile features, tastes and smells of the place. Far from reproducing an 'objective' image of the cities, my experience of the world was conveyed in a multisensory environment in which the visual featured alongside other perceptual faculties to craft deeper connections between audiences and their ancestral cultural memories of these places. As such, it enabled them to become part of a performative space which affectively reproduced lived experiences across time, connecting the past to the present through individual memory routes. In this respect the ethics of the 'navigation mode' I used during the research process can be inserted within a feminine paradigm of cultural analysis, as Irigaray's theoretical approach to sexual difference seems to suggest:

Ethics is no longer aligned solely with the Enlightenment values of neutrality and universality; ethical action is no longer required to

be impersonal and free of emotion. An ethics of sensation, materiality, and the body, an erotic ethics, can be substituted for the lucidity of abstract judgment. From their role as the obscured and unthought substratum of metaphysical ethics, the body and eros become the shifting yet fertile breeding ground of new values (Ince, 1996: 132).

My experimentation with an artistic language focused on the body as a sensor of meaning, eventually resulting in a multisensory, dynamic representation of migration as an embodied experience of recurrent patterns of connectivity across diverse communities within and outside Britain. On this basis I find Irigaray's concept of the 'sensible transcendental' (2005) very useful to describe both my experience as an artist and that of the audience invited to participate in the re-enactment of my journey through the installation. During my travels I had gone 'beyond the hierarchal dichotomies of mind and body, form and matter, sacred and carnal' (Tilghman, 2009:50), unsettling historical, cultural and psychological assumptions of others and myself, and bringing to a crisis my relationship with language, only transitorily resorted in acts of *Poiesis*.¹ As described by Michel Onfray, I decided to engage with the cities as a poet, because: 'The poet, more than anybody else, places his individual body at the centre of the place inhabited by his consciousness and sensibility' (Onfray, 2007).

As a result, the artwork that emerged from the creative process asks the audience to reconsider heavily stereotyped visual and symbolic representations of the 'other', and position oneself within the 'new epistemological project' of feminist analysis (Braidotti, 2011: 73). Moving from the art space to engage with other fields of knowledge production, the artwork asks to rethink issues of vision, power, and the Western gaze, and engage with a more socially inclusive understanding of urban cultures and public spaces in our pluri-cultural cities.

Cultural Memes and the New Aesthetics of the Multisensory

The installation *Streets of... 7 Cities in 7 Minutes* was premiered in 2012 during the London Olympic Games and later presented in various international venues as an experiential artwork. Composed of seven immersive environments each occupied by a city and conceived as a memory box of different shapes and colours, the installation was made up of digital sounds, images, smells, objects and tastes of the places. By entering these sensory spaces audiences were invited to explore the interaction between bodies, memories and urban environments as a form of primal artistic expression, immersing themselves in the living interculturalism of the cities. The initial inspiration for the installation came from my long-term interest and research on the culturally diverse British landscape and London in particular. This emblematic city, a crossroads of local and global identities, represented the pivot of a wheel whose spokes reach out towards other places in the world in a cultural continuum. Looking at the everyday life as the arena where memories of intercultural encounters are unconsciously performed, the project

focused on the observation and extraction of the cities' specific memes – that is units of cultural ideas, symbols or practices transmitted from one person to another through speech, gestures and rituals. In putting the cultural DNA of the places on display, the project sought to break down cultural barriers and re-evaluate notions of migration, heritage and cultural identity in contemporary globalized metropolises.

Over the years, my initial idea of a single screen-moving image artwork changed and evolved.² Following Marshall McLuhan's suggestion that the media is an extension of the senses (1964), my attempt to represent a 'sensory archive' of the everyday life was translated into a multimodal installation that made use of new and old technologies to reproduce an ambience to be perceived through all five senses. The installation was meant to become a space where socialisation could take place, and a form of 'mixophilia', borrowing Zygmunt Baumann's concept (2003: 112), could be temporarily established, offering audiences an experience of peaceful living with cultural difference while enjoying sensory stimulation. This form of experiential engagement with the artwork was meant to linger beyond the immediate experience, as the atmosphere of the places remained with the audience outside the installation space.

Gernot Böhme's description of atmosphere as a condition implied the physical presence of the subject and object with a focused attention on place and the act of relying on sensory perceptions, as opposed to a description and visual representation of the cities. *Streets of... 7 Cities in 7 Minutes* was based on the intention of engaging audiences with a renewed understanding of the culturally diverse aesthetics of everyday life, rehabilitating the term, as Böhme suggested, to its original sense of theory of perception. The installation was meant to reproduce a different atmosphere as a result of the interaction between the physical and virtual presence of persons and objects within any of its given environments. Referencing Walter Benjamin's definition of aura in the work of art, Böhme suggests that the dimension of naturalness and corporeality in our experience of it means that 'to perceive aura is to absorb it into one's own bodily state of being. What is perceived is an indeterminate spatially extended quality of feeling' (1993: 116).

The sensory experience of the seven cities was designed to engage audiences with the aura of the cities, stimulating an 'alternate approach' to art and its consumption, and a new kind of aesthetics.³ The project also reflected my on-going research on synchronic systems of experiencing the images and sounds of everyday life through nonlinear interactions between visual and aural elements recorded from the streets. The installation referenced a number of artists of the avant-garde movement who employed the moving image – including Dziga Vertov (*Man with the Movie Camera*, 1929); Tina Modotti (her seminal immersion in Mexican everyday life); and the American artists Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand (in particular their art documentary of 1920s everyday life in New York). Yet, in my work the multisensory distanced itself from the naturalistic powers of photography, experimenting with the concept of hyper reality and the categories of expression, realism, identity and the unconscious through a performative approach to audience interaction.

Video works such as *Exodus* by Steve McQueen, and *Crumpling Shanghai* by Dong Song, or Raghubir Singh's colour photo sequences of everyday life in India, engaged with similar questions, while 'relational art' practitioners like Sophie Calle echoed my line of enquiry by imagining alternative ways of dealing with the subject/object divide. However, my experiment situated itself outside these parameters, as it aimed to critically reposition the viewer and the viewed as 'liquid' contemporary subjects, looking at them as conveyers of a common, unconscious, ancestral past constantly re-enacted in the present moment. As I wrote in my travel log in 2009:

According to Hegel 'synchronicity mimes the utterance of the word that created things'. This is how situations from the past make their way in the everyday life through sounds. The challenge is to recreate this synchronicity in the editing room: the rumble of ancestral memories resurfacing through broadcast radio waves in the Petit Soco of Tangier or the clanking of fruit pushcarts at the Feira de São Joaquim in Salvador with the voice of women selling fish at the old market of Lisbon; the sound of the sea obstinately caressing the coast line of Salvador, with the breaths of amazement from people watching the sunset at Porto da Barra, only geographically separated from the port of Lagos, Portugal, which housed the first slave market in Europe. Meaning reveals itself in between things. I start to understand the concept as I follow my route, resigned to the impossibility of representing life in a continuum. Only a broken narrative can reflect the nature of my experience of the city; my thoughts intersecting the vision of what surrounds me with cultural messages carried from my senses to the brain. It is a syncopated movement; it is jazz, an unbroken rhythm of drums running underneath the everyday life.

The Body as Living Cultural Archive

As Simon Weil noted in her book *The Need for Roots*:

it is the distillations from the living past which should be jealously preserved, everywhere, whether it be in Paris or Tahiti, for there are not too many such on the entire globe. [...] we possess no other life, no other living sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated and created afresh by us (2011: 51).

Looking at the interstices between memory, human body and urban environment, I set out to re-present the now-ness of our collective ancestral memories (as in Carl Jung's study of the collective unconscious and archetypes) through a sensorial narrative of travel. It was during my visit to Tangier that I fully realised the role played in the process by the shifting, hybrid nature of time. As the multiplicity of signifiers were transmitted to me through sounds, smells and sights of the old Medina, the awareness of my

body as a gendered, historical and cultural site of reception somehow receded, and I morphed into a seismographer engaged in the process of making sense of the surroundings through time. As I wrote in my travel log published online at www.streetsof.org: 'How many steps before mine have imprinted their marks on the old pavements of this white city? I can feel the thin layers of ancient dust falling from the buildings around me, filling my nostrils'.

Since the onset of the project a continuous relational condition of engagement with the place kept me anchored to a 'ground-truthing mode of exploration'. It was like living in a state of constantly activated 'intimate-sensing', to quote the geographer Douglas Porteus as reported by David Howes:

Intimate sensing, especially in the Third World, is complex, difficult, and often filthy. The word is found to be untidy rather than neat. But intimate sensing is rich, warm, involved [...] and the rewards involve dimensions other than the intellectual (2005: 323).

In Tangier I realised that my experience of the three migration routes as a 'living archive' was taking place within the private space of my own body as 'the Other of the Other', to quote from Irigaray. In the beginning I felt the allure of creating a space beyond boundaries, a totality made up of fragments represented by each individual city. Finally, I was confronted by the irreducible otherness of both the surroundings and myself, which forced me to reconsider the dynamics of my interplay with the culture in which I was immersed. In *Architecture of the Senses* Howes suggests that: 'The perceptual is cultural and political, and not simply (as psychologists and neuroscientists would have it) a matter of cognitive processes or neurological mechanisms located in the individual subject' (2005: 322).

To unravel this crucial concept I positioned the cities along a path designed to culminate in a space both alternative and complementary to the others. As a result, *Streets of London* reduced the act of viewing to the static image of the rising sun over the city's skyline edited against a sound score echoing the cultures represented in the artwork and more. The space was meant to induce a process of internal visualisation and a fluid approach to the process of sensing the city, while the split between the visual and aural composition of the piece aimed at focussing attention, to be abruptly disrupted at the sixth minute by CCTV camera images of London's streets. In the age of video surveillance the act of viewing risks to lose its humanity and innocence. Yet, creative mental re-compositions of others (which video artists like Bill Viola and Shirin Neshat have been particularly successful in stimulating) have the potential to open up new routes in the perception and understanding of our position in the world. As described by Gaston Bachelard and quoted by Wolfgang Schivelbusch in his essay *Nightfall Fear in the Street*:

Anyone who is in the dark and sees a light in the distance feels that he or she is being observed, because "this lantern in the distance is not 'sufficient unto itself'". It constantly strives

outwards. It watches so unflaggingly that it watches over things (2005: 73).

Free Flowing Interactions with Multiple Cultural Heritages

The interconnection between London and the other cities in *Streets of... 7 Cities in 7 Minutes* was conceived as a sensory journey through remote memory systems linking the installation together. Consequently, my attempt to question definitions of centre and periphery, as we know them in geopolitical terms, was reflected in the option for the audience members to wander around the installation following their own personal inclinations rather than the suggested trajectory. This approach echoes Edward Said's concept of 'the voyage in':

The voyage in, then, constitutes an especially interesting variety of hybrid cultural work. And that it exists at all is a sign of adversarial internationalization in an age of continued imperial structures. No longer does the logos dwell exclusively, as it were, in London and Paris. No longer does history run unilaterally, as Hegel believed, from east to west, or from south to north, becoming more sophisticated and developed, less primitive and backward as it goes. Instead, the weapons of criticism have become part of the historical legacy of empire, in which the separations and exclusions of "divide and rule" are erased and surprising new configurations spring up (1994: 295).

It is in this circular mode of experience that my epic display of tacit heritage finds its place against the wider backdrop of philosophical re-thinking of the role it plays in the formation of cultural identities. Conceived as a living archive of the everyday life, the artwork aimed to shift the emphasis away from the idea of the 'archive' as a static location or collection of material, towards that of a process reflecting the present in its permanent transition. At the same time, the project followed in the footsteps of Said's geographical enquiry into historical experience, in an attempt to reconfigure 'overlapping territories and intertwined histories' through a series of memory sessions with members of the audience connected to the cultures represented in the artwork. Concurrently with the opening of the installation in London, between August and November 2012 members of the public were invited to interact with the artwork and explore a creative form of interplay between art, life and collective cultural memories as part of an intergenerational, community engagement programme called the *Living Archaeology of the Place*. The programme involved ten memory sessions with about 70 members of communities living in London who either came from or had direct knowledge of the cities featured in the installation. After experiencing the virtual journey through the cities, participants were asked to share feelings, thoughts and memories of them. The engagement focused on old traditions, daily rituals, urban life, as well as personal notions of home and cultural identity. In January 2013 *Streets of... 7 cities in 7 minutes* and the *Living Archaeology of the Place* were presented at the Rich Mix in London. A project evaluator interviewed audience members

and amongst the various areas of critical discussion, community empowerment emerged as a particularly important question. As detailed in the evaluation report:

The audience feedback signified that as a result of displaying the diverse cultural landscape of the cities, participants felt and experienced a sense of freedom about their own cultural identity and diversity and thus felt better empowered to explore pre-existing notions of cultural diversity. The audience members responded that the exhibition compelled them to reconnect with a sense of adventure to travel again and offered them an opportunity to explore their pre-existing views of the cultures displayed among the seven cities (Ardakani, 2013: 20-1).

With regards to the impact of the multisensory experience the report noted that:

Numerous participants [of the memory sessions] commented on the effectiveness of combining visuals, sounds and scents, as a very powerful and evocative sensory tool, which is also linked to memory. "It was lovely to see and hear the sceneries and noise of my hometown - Salvador - it brought back to me some buried memories" (Ardakani, 2013:17).

Finally, in relation to the audience's engagement with their heritage and cultural identity, the report noted that:

This active level of engagement of the programme offered them an opportunity to reconnect with their cultural heritage and reconsider the current status of their cultural identity. Within the memory sessions, some participants expressed concern that without this type of art and cultural programme, their identities are at risk of becoming homogenised and may lose essence as a result of the ever-growing powers of mass media stereotyping. "The videos put me in touch with ancestral and archetypal aspects of everyday life and practices, recognizable everywhere" (Ardakani, 2013: 25).

An Open-Ended Conclusion

Located at the interstices of an interdisciplinary dialogue between performing arts, critical heritage, sensorial urbanism, and digital technologies, the artwork discussed in this paper shows that a multisensory approach to live art, performance and digital arts has the potential to create a deeper level of engagement with the subject of research both for the artist during the research process and for the audience through art fruition. According to David Howes and Constance Classen, sensory perceptions nowadays are mostly exploited for marketing strategies related to consumer goods and experiences, both in physical and virtual environments. The sense of smell in particular, has recently entered virtual interactive spaces, systems of communication and the arts. Nonetheless, the way in which we perceive

physical urban environments through our body is rarely acknowledged in urban and heritage studies. In this respect the artwork raises a number of critical questions in relation to how we can build spaces outside the art world that take into account the presence of our bodies as sensors of meaning and archives of unconscious collective cultural memories. In particular, there must be a focus on how migrant communities can contribute to the creation of a 'sensorial urbanism' and a broader, more inclusive understanding of art and critical heritage, as well as what position this kind of work can have within the galleries and museums sector.

As Stuart Hall reminds us, identity is not an 'already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent', but we should think of 'identity as a "production" which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation' (Hall, 1990: 222). When audiences enter the space of *Streets of... 7 Cities in 7 Minutes* they have an opportunity to experience their own changing collective identities every time they enter the multisensory units, re-imagining their communities, their roots and histories in a dynamic interplay of past, present and future. In this respect, the audience's active engagement with the artwork through the memory sessions points towards a direction that goes beyond the 'artistic' confines of the project, challenging stereotypical representations of the 'other cultures' and making its methodology worthy to be extended to other fields. In our increasingly super-diverse cities (a term first introduced by Steve Vertovec, 2007) the critical issue at stake is to find a way to engage with urban intercultural practices to better respond to the needs of a globalised, technologically fluid human condition, which often excludes rather than includes the 'others' through divisions and ghettoisations. As Bauman points out:

If anything, the contrary is true – since whereas the city is the dumping ground for anxieties and apprehensions generated by globally induced uncertainty and insecurity, it is also a prime training ground where the means to placate and disperse that uncertainty and insecurity can be experimented with, tried out and eventually learned and adopted (2003: 117).

In this respect the artwork offers itself to be a space for collective re-thinking and positive action around processes of democratisation and public creative engagement, stimulating a dynamic and inclusive approach to the living experience of culture in our globalised metropolises. It is my hope that the 'situated knowledge' expressed through the artwork, might be extended to wider fields of research, including critical heritage, CHI (Computer Human Interaction), digital humanities and urban studies.

¹ *Poiesis* (Ancient Greek: ποιησις) is etymologically derived from the ancient term ποιέω, which means 'to make'. This word, the root of our modern 'poetry', was first a verb, an action that transforms and continues the world. As such, *poietic* work reconciles thought with matter and time, and a person with the world. For a discussion on the concept in Heideggerian terms see Di

Pippo, Alexander Ferrari (2000) 'The Concept of Poiesis in Heidegger's An Introduction to Metaphysics' in David Shiklar (ed.) Thinking Fundamentals, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences, Vol. 9.

² This is how the first artwork *Streets of Naples* was presented in 2004 at the London International Festival of Theatre.

³ For an extensive description of this concept see Zardini, 2005.

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