

Contents:

- 1.** Introduction (p.3)
- 2.** Chapter 1 | The unwanted, the unnoticed and the streets (p. 4- 11)
 - 2.1.The unwanted
 - 2.2. The unnoticed
 - 2.3. The voice
- 3.** Chapter 2 | Leave a message /project and research/ (p. 11- 24)
- 4.** Chapter 3 | DIY network (im)possible? (p. 25- 29)
- 5.** Chapter 4 | Bibliography (p.29)

INTRODUCTION

As a Bulgarian living in the Netherlands, I at first found it bliss not to understand the voices around me. After some time, however, the pleasure of being isolated from the production of meaning turned into a delicate, permanent discomfort and I now find myself in constant flux – at home but still foreign. Consequently, I became fascinated by the object of the voice, which is the subject of my research project over the past months.

Mladen Dolar identifies the voice as a “zone of overlapping, the crossing, the extimate (*Dolar, 2006, p.65*). It is somewhere between interiority and exteriority. Voices contain a certain public moment in time. Voices enact the social space that is embedded in the every day. It is that space that is uncomfortable for the stranger, but at the same time holds a poetic value. The voice is an intersection between personal and social. ” (*Dolar, 2006, p.32*)

For the last months I have been working on initiating a network of voice mailboxes in public space. Voice mailboxes that allow members of the public to record and distribute audio messages in public space throughout different cities, countries, contexts. Connecting locations and letting their situations mix, hear, surprise, confuse, offend and love each other

They are all connected, so that the last recorded message on any of the boxes will be played back on all of the boxes in the network. As soon as a new recording is made, it becomes the one played on all devices. Thus the boxes facilitate a non-instant, slow dialogue between strangers, travelling an unplanned journey through cityscapes. An exploration of isolation and connectivity in public spaces. I have initiated the creation of a little fragment of contact, a way of briefly connecting in a typically disparate and isolating city. A moment of communication and miscommunication at the same time.

CH1

The unwanted, the unnoticed and the streets

The following chapter will elaborate on my methodology and its development before and throughout the course and support it with case studies of previous projects, with a focus on my graduation research and project.

In my work, I develop research methods and experiments with various media. Feeling comfortable with, but not excited about using photography and video, I mainly employ them as a sketch tool, making notes, documenting my process. I have moved on from the two dimensional qualities of images, both still and moving. In moving image, apart from its documentary functions, I discovered fascination in the tactility of film (16 mm) and projector and their functionality and limitations together, almost as a separate work from the film content itself. Currently I focus on building tangible works and experimenting with DIY strategies. My interest is in using low-tech, simple, accessible methods in unexpected combinations. Creating objects (material or virtual) that reflect my own feeling, experience or anxiety and translate it to the viewer/user. I examine processes of encoding, signification and communication to bring personal moments.

Previously, working in the context of photography as my main tool, I gained considerable observer skills. Being discreet, camouflaged, looking, listening and taking with me.

In my images, I have been dealing with subjects similar to my current interests, mostly observation and isolation of neglected, often banal objects and situations. Gradually my interest shifted from finding these situations and using photography as a way to document them, to creating tangible works that exist as extensions and interpreters to their environment.

Previous work

The Unwanted

These methods can be found in projects that started in the first trimester of the course. In *Message Delivery*, work from first trimester with Mathaijs van Oosterhoudt, the focus is on self-driven, chain reaction urban encounters. A somewhat primitive, manual adventure of hand-written notes that travel through the city from person to person and we (the project initiators) serve only as couriers to facilitate, observe and document the randomness of manual interactions. An inefficient, unwanted way to connect with one another, that renders a brief, poetic moment when interrupting people throughout their daily routine.

The situationist artist Constant Nieuwenhuys states that *We require adventure. Not finding it any longer on earth, there are those who want to look for it on the moon. We opt first to create situations here, new situations.* (Guy Debord and the situationist *International Texts and Documents*, edited by Tom McDonough, p.118) In this case, taking inspiration in the *dérive* (literally: "drifting", a Situationist International practice), we drop our daily activities, to get indulged in a drift through the city, a journey that unlike the original *dérive* is not driven by our own attractions of the terrain but is directed by each person in the chain of messages. One leads to the other, thus shaping our kind of *dérive*. We initiate a situation and then let it create its self.

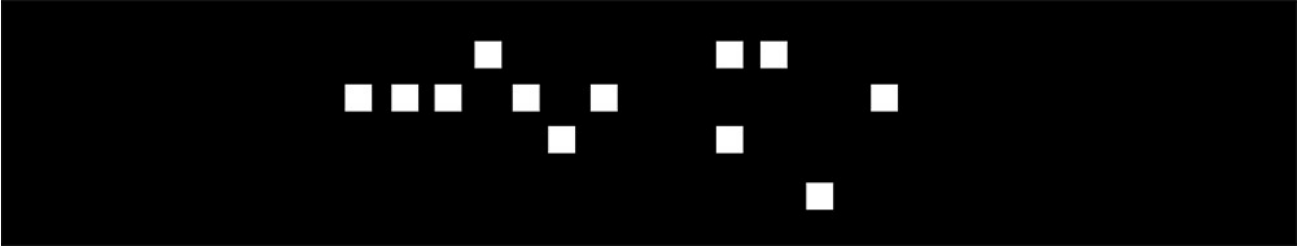
Being able to address anyone in the city and have their note delivered, most people decide not to address someone they know, that could be contacted via numerous other, way more effective channels of communication, but rather address strangers in specific locations. An act that would not have occurred in a live situation, but which becomes possible when the addresser and addressee never actually meet. The only proof and verification of the authenticity of the messages is the handwritten note, sign of the presence of the other.





That which changes our way of seeing the street is more important than that which changes our way of seeing the painting - Guy Debord (in, The Situationist City p. 69 Simon Sadler)

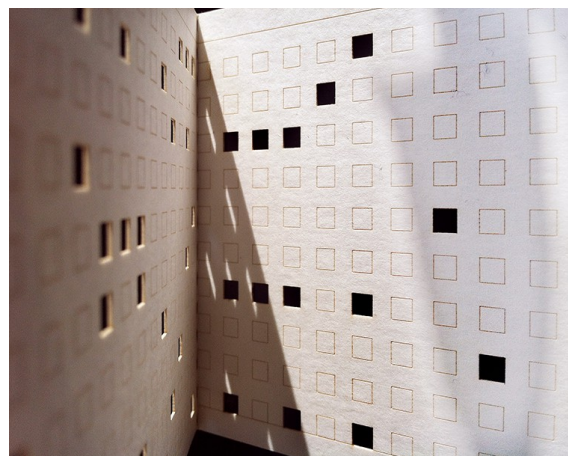
The Unnoticed

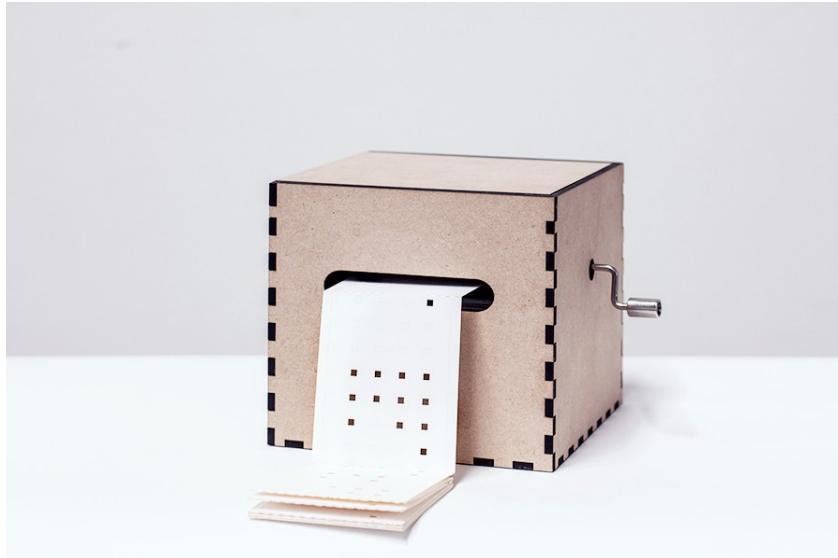


After working on smaller projects, and experimenting with different approaches, my interest toward urban spaces grew more. It resulted in '**Street Compositions**'. The work focuses on the unnoticed poetry in the simple situations of urban night light. The project has two parts and they could be seen as independent works, as well as elements of one work. The first part of the work is a custom made music box set. It is a simple automatic, hand-cranked, programmable musical machine that creates sound by the use of a set of pins that pluck the tuned teeth of a steel comb. The programming object is a punch card, having holes to express a program. The mechanism is mounted in a wooden box (cube with 13 cm sides) with a metal crank and two holes for the punch card to go through. It is built to be a simple, low-tech, intuitive, instantly accessible object.

The process of creating the card melodies is closely connected to photographs. I observe the streets at night and take big scale panoramas of the whole length of the streets. I look at the photos, take out the lit windows of the street buildings and apply them as holes in the punch card. The card, decoded by the music box transforms the chaotic noise of the city into a minimal, analogue melody. A mechanical, hand-cranked machine turns people's unconscious collaboration into a personal, poetic moment, rhythmic soundscapes of the streets.

A reason to create a physical object is the transient nature of the information transmitted. The situations that exist at that very moment and are now materialized into paper and continue to exist as code. Transforming scale is curious when using a small, simple device, such as a music box as a decoder. A street fits in a box...in a hand.





The second part of the project aims to bring back the melody to its original environment as an installation in public space. The melody of a specific location is recorded and played through custom made concrete speakers along the same street. This act completes the encoding-decoding process and preserves those transient, insignificant moments. They exist once again in a different form.

Small, quiet and heavy. The music seamlessly loops in the concrete speaker placed on the ground. The melody is subtle and blends with the ambient sound. It is there not to be noticed right away, but rather to be discovered. A discreet poetic presence of a self-organised melody.

The representation of code, created my multiple entities, unaware of each other's contribution. Is the presence of the speaker being noticed, does the sound trigger curiosity and emotion? These are the questions asked, or is it just another entry to the urban noise both audible and visual. Just like the window lights, rendering no special meaning.

The time we spent outside homes and offices, mostly time when we move, go from one space to another, similarly is a transient time, a period of transition, a moment, very interesting to me because of these qualities.

The street as a social and geographical space is conventional in every day life, but in this work, an object different from the regular, known elements of the street creates ground for an alternative experience, a poetic click throughout the repeating pattern. A routine becomes present in a different form in everyday life in order to break that same routine and bring a poetic moment for individuals.



The voice

Another object in public space is of current interest to me. The voice. This interest built up in a course of a year living in a multicultural foreign country, namely the Netherlands. Trying hard to connect to those voices, but hardly making it, understanding fragments of sentences, mishearing, misinterpreting. Wondering and trying to guess what language that is. A desire to say something, to be part of the environment, the community, but from a safe distance, without actually being there. This thought haunted me for some time. How could I also exist, manifest myself in my everyday habitat? How could I connect my personality to the spaces I dwell. To speak but not to be there, I felt the need for such an act.

The displaced voice has always been an ambiguous object. A source of awe but also excitement. Dating back to ancient Greece, where Pythagoras's students could not see him but only hear his voice. The etymology of the word acousmatic comes from the greek word akousma: what is heard. Pythagoras students were called akousmatikoi (hearers/acusmatics). The advantage of this mechanism was that the students, the followers, were confined to "their Master's voice," not distracted by his looks or quirks of behaviour. They would not be distracted by the spectacle of presentation, the theatrical effects which always pertain to lecturing. They had to concentrate merely on the voice and the meaning emanating from it. (*Mladen Dolar, 2006, p. 61*)

Ventriloquism is a practice, where the ventriloquist modifies his voice in such a way that it appears as if it emanates from another direction than his own mouth. This practice dates back in ancient history, utilized as a religious practise. Moving on in history to be associated with witchcraft, and further shifting to performance and entertainment.

While displacing the voice, synthesising it was another point explored in history. In the end of the 18 century, Wolfgang Kempelen constructed a machine,

capable of imitating the human voice. He travelled and demonstrated his machine as a spectacle, but its original intention was a socially orientated, to give voice to deaf people. (*Brigitte Felderer, 2008, p. 163*)

In any of the cases above, the voice is not dispatched completely. The direction is clear. There is a source, whether the ventriloquist dummy or a speaking machine and the voice comes out of there, as if attached on an invisible but relevant string. This metaphor becomes physical with the appearance of the telephone, attached to the telephone wire . A voice successfully compressed into a wire, a line. Voice that is extended to travel distances. Alexander Graham Bell is credited with inventing the first practical telephone. He was awarded the first US patent for the telephone in 1876. From that moment on, the voice slowly lost its mystical acousmatic qualities. The excitement of the disembodied voice slowly faded and it become a trivial event. In the late nineties, mobile telephony became present. Mobile phones liberated the users from the physical environment. The disembodied voice could appear anywhere. It started to be carried in the pocket. In most recent times, mobile phones are smart. No longer do they serve to only transmit the voice trough space. Smart phones are our omnipresent communication tool. In our bag, pocket, hand. Mostly in our hand rather next to our ear. Voice calls are being pushed away by other means of communicating, easier ones, visible rather than audible, giving us a chance to be continuously connected, without disturbing the environment. Voice calls are becoming a sort of an event. A voice call signifies some sort of urgency. It is no longer a casual event. I would argue that the disembodied voice is slowly winning back its mystique power, its ambiguity. The project, main case study in this thesis builds upon that idea.

CH2

LEAVEAMESSAGE

LEAVEAMESSAGE is a participative project that attempts to initiate a network of voice mailboxes that allow members of the public to record and distribute audio messages in public space. Each box is a simple device, that has the functions to record and playback audio. It has an interface with only two buttons. One button plays back the last recorded message and the other button allows people to make a new recording. The boxes are connected and synced through the internet, so that the last recorded message on any of the boxes will be played back on all of the boxes in the network. As soon as a new recording is made, it becomes the one played on all devices. All recordings are uploaded on a server and then to a webpage, where the full sequence can be browsed through and listened to. The visitor can see the place, date and time each recording was made.



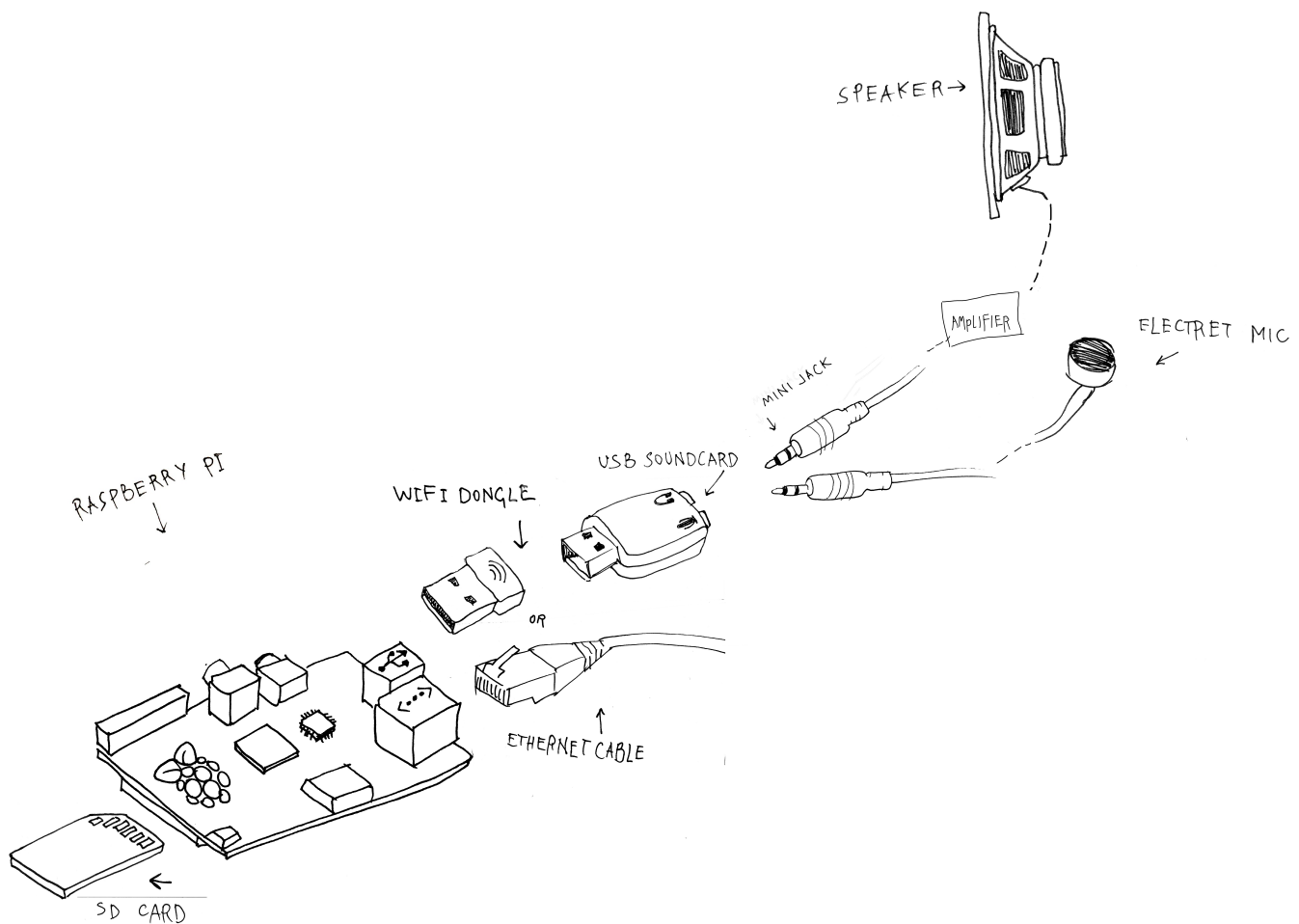
It is fascinating how stories and dialogues are formed between strangers in cities through interventions in the public realm. How different locations become places of entry into a collaborative audio experience, a non-instant dialogue, created by acts of strangers. The boxes provide playful performative moments for passers by to break from routine and enter into a network

of anonymous voices, travelling an unplanned journey through cityscapes. An attempt to create a drifting sonic dialogue between people in cities. Public space is important, because it is detached from the regulation of online user accounts, profiles and any instant identity. It is a social environment created by collective anonymity. The voice is an anonymous aural fingerprint that connects strangers together for a brief moment in time. I think of the voice chain in public space like throwing a message in a bottle into a river. The message goes along the flow and reaches a next person that opens it up out of curiosity and has the chance to put his own instead and let the bottle continue the journey.

[[[PROCESS and RESEARCH]]]

The leaveamessage box is a DIY device working with the open source development platform raspberry pi (single-board computer) .

Below is an overview of the components used in a leaveamessage box.



-----> **First steps**

A few months ago, in the framework of my previous projects, this work, starts with my curiosity to investigate the possibility of collecting voices in a fragmented way. My interest in such a research came from the idea of initiating a chain of audio messages, left by people in public space. In other words, look at content created within an alternative communication infrastructure. That relates to the chain-like structure of my previous work.

Sound started being part of my work in Street Compositions and thus the transience of the voice, its immateriality, ambiguity and abstractness attracted me. Hearing and discovering sound in public space led me to notice how little we notice the omnipresence of voice in public space. Personally, I discovered the qualities of the voice, only after arriving in the Netherlands, where suddenly voices inhabiting the streets spoke so many different languages. That collaborative cacophony made me distinguish the sound of voice among urban noise, and want to capture its transiency and preserve it. Different languages and communities spoke amongst each other thus one did not really listen or pay much attention to the other. Well for me, as a foreigner, there was no way to hear one or another, simply because to me they were all equally non-understandable. My urge was to intertwine these voices, to mix them and thus recreate my experience. This mixing, I could see possible if people could voluntarily record themselves.

The prototyping / making, learning, testing

The first place to look was at recording mechanisms that already existed. Contrast attracts me, as well as unexpected combinations, so the first object that seemed to be what I was looking for was the answering machine. It is an object that inhabits private, rather than public space. Or better to say 'inhabited' since answering machines are more or less obsolete by now.

Unlike centralized voicemail...the answering machine is an existing, physical device that must be set up in the user's premises alongside the user's telephone. The first commercially successful answering machine started being sold at the beginning of the 60's in the US but Europe lagged much and it became widespread in the late 1970s. Answering machines were a very popular device for a while and apart from its purely applied functions, it occasionally was a platform for performativity. (example with George's greeting message from Seinfeld, an American sitcom) Both in the case of the greeting and the left messages.

That creative ground vanished very soon, since the answering machine got obsolete soon after it entered people's homes, with the appearance of mobile technology. Well, one may argue that the technology still exists in voicemail but I believe that the time when someone called and left a voice message is gone. Exactly that fact, that answering machines are technology that had such a short life, and so soon got neglected, made it very interesting to revisit. It is meant to be a personal object, that is located at home. Callers know who will listen to the message.

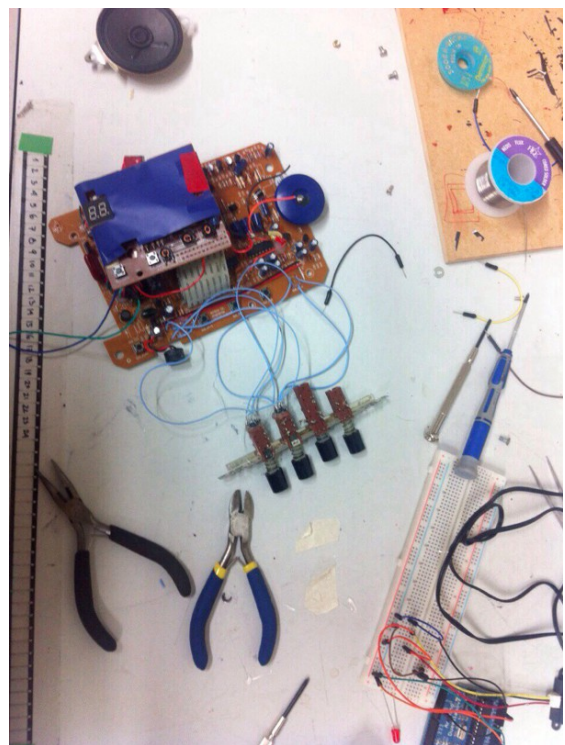
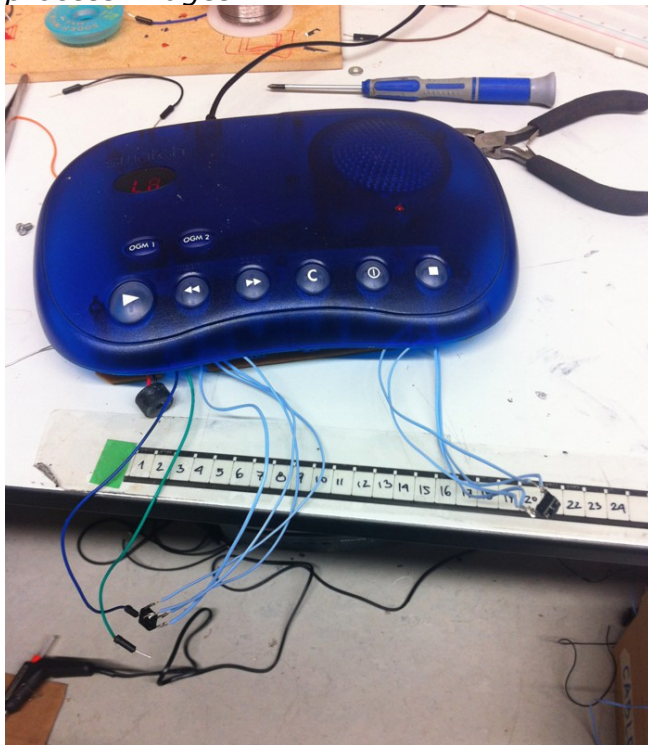
In a text written by Marc Holtof, he proposes the answering machine as a remembering device and at the same time as a forgetting machine. A mechanism that allows to postpone reality. A machine that records and delays reality itself (*Marc Holthof, 1998*). The functionality to delay reality but still to remember it and make it present was exciting, especially when imagined functioning in public space, providing

room to remain without being there.

My use of the answering machine would be an almost complete disposition to what it is originally meant to be. An object, placed in public space, that is no longer a personal one, but a platform for collective use.

For my intentions, I could no longer use the answering machine in its pure functionality, since I did not need a phone connection. There was no fixed recipient, nor caller. The input would come from the places it occupied. I started experimenting with Arduino and answering machines to make an object that is able to attract attention of the passer-by. I modified an answering machine so it becomes responsive to presence and invites the one close to it, to leave a message. Unfortunately, this was not really stable enough to work for long, and served only as an initial experiment to observe interaction and presence of an untypical to the urban environment object.

process images



On the other hand I did not want to attach an element of nostalgia to the object that would inevitably be present with the interaction with a recognisable answering machine. The familiarity of such an object would create a line that directs behaviour, because of the existing knowledge on interacting with an answering machine.

That led to future prototyping developments.

A desire to build my own machine, combining existing technology with my own input. In the last two years I embraced the Do-it-yourself methodology with excitement, both analogue and digital. By going the whole way through in making my own apparatus, it becomes a personal, an artistic object, a crafted, handmade tool. One that can be made according to my intentions, one that can be changed and modified as to the project develops. That is the reason to invest time and effort to figure out everything, from electronics and hardware, to the code that makes all this come to life.

After experimenting with redundant media (answering machines) and Arduino, it was obvious that a more stable and complex system was to be assembled. Building the device using a raspberry pi for a brain seemed the most logical way to go. Raspberry pi is a tiny and affordable computer that primarily uses Linux kernel-based

operating systems. Working with the Raspberry pi helped me get a better understanding of what is inside the black box that the computer was for me and helped me prototype my own box, a leaveamessage box. A relevant point is that, while going through the building process, I have basically made a device, easy to recreate by anyone who is enthusiastic and knowledgeable enough.

Inspiration for my work is the *Dead Drops* project by Aram Bartholl, an anonymous, offline, peer to peer file-sharing network in public space. What connects it to my own interest is the need to go out and be present at a specific physical location, or that it will be discovered, as it became part of the surrounding environment. Also the fact that it could be easily made and the network to live on its own. My interest in recording and playing back audio made things more complex and clumsy to be that easily embedded in public space.

I started by making a sound capturing and playing back device would allow people passing by to record their voice. The recording time was set and limited to ten seconds. Basically with the press of the record button, the light went off and the recording started, after ten seconds it stopped automatically. This limitation was like a score, it created a series of short, almost sample-like audio recordings. The last recorded message was played back aloud every time someone approaches the object. However, this interactive, motion response made the object intrusive, repeating itself even when the passer-by was not interested in it, that became easily irritating. In an urban environment, there is constant movement, which is stimuli to such mechanism and thus the device starts to creating sound pollution in the space it inhabits and is in danger of becoming annoying.

That was not an intention, on the contrary the desire was that the object is less intrusive, triggers curiosity and has to be discovered. That brought me back to the simplicity of the answering machine. A simple device that plays back and records audio.

So the next prototype became simpler, without a proximity sensor. Only a case with two buttons, and an LED light. One button to listen, and the other to record. Choosing big, arcade buttons, was response to a comment on an article about the obsolete, neglected and forgotten media. In the comments, people started a discussion about objects that disappear recently and that they personally miss most. This post stood out.



MSI, Captain ▸ Wilson Rothman

10/09/09 4:37pm

Good article. Buttons are what I will really miss. I used to volunteer working in a local tv station. Soooo many buttons. :)

And then came a reply to this comment, with a picture from a cartoon from the late '90s (the all-favourite Dexter's Lab) followed by a discussion on the joy of pressing physical buttons and the increasing lack of them in recent devices and interfaces.



The series follows boy genius Dexter, as he tries to keep his bumbling sister, Dee Dee, away from his secret laboratory. Somehow able to sneak her way through the lab's hi-tech security system, Dee Dee manages to destroy Dexter's inventions. Mostly by pressing the red button. Dee Dee is Dexter's dim-witted sister, and she is first, attracted by the way the button as an object looks, and then she is as any being curious about what happens if the button is pressed. The unexpected, the unknown, the surprise moment.

That simple, natural urge is what I have taken into account when figuring out the look and functionality of the device. I count on the universally embedded ideas that buttons are meant to be pressed, they give the user a sense of control and there is always a consequence, hence something happens after the press.

So the final interface of the Leaveamessage box shaped to being a box with two buttons, and LED light, a speaker and a microphone.

Field Experiments, content, user feedback

Rotterdam, public

First official experiment: 13, 14 and 15 of December 2013

Location: Witte de Withstraat 50, 3012 BR Rotterdam, mounted on the facade of TENT, centre for contemporary art

On a nice, cold December morning a yellow, wooden box appeared on the facade of TENT. The first setup of the leaveamessage box was a prototype, assembled fast, with lasercut parts. It was somewhat clumsy both technically and visually, but a start has to be made, in order to start improving.

An open call for Radio Calling event in TENT was a good reason to initiate the

project and start exploring interaction in such a central location in Rotterdam. A busy street like Witte de Withstraat. So many different voices passing by.



first tests with Max Dovey and the true joy of hearing your own recorded voice

Together with Max Dovey (a friend, performance artist, who is reacting to his own recorded voice in the image above this text), we installed the box, and the aim was to use the recordings in the Radio Calling performance/online broadcast. The object, not secure enough, had to be taken down every evening, to be safely put inside the building, since it would not endure possible assaults on behalf of unhappy or under alcohol or drug possession passers-by. That of course deprived the recording archive of the more interesting part of the day, when people are off their duties and in the transit period between work and home and may have let their vocal expression take over the street for ten seconds. The night period remained undepicted as well.

Those periods are actually very interesting since they are the existing moments in modern every day life when one has the time or opportunity to indulge in a form of drifting in the urban environment, when one has the time to detour, stop, discover. Similarly to the Situationist's adventures in the city. But in this case the experimental behaviour appears when approaching and discovering the unfamiliar object. In total, the box remained in public for twenty-four hours. The recordings grew with the time the box spent on the street – on the third day there was the most interaction. That proved that the inhabitants of the region are often observing an unfamiliar object in public space and it takes a certain time to get habituated to it.

Of course spontaneous interaction is also present, by people who are curious by nature and perhaps less shy or in a hurry.

Already in this very first experiment for a brief moment of time a taxonomy is visible. There were extremely diverse - from purely pathic - to cite one of Jakobson's six functions of language, (*Sebeok 350-377*) recordings, performative ones to even empty ones, meaning that only the space's ambience was present in the audio.

Passers-by could listen to the last recorded moment, and could choose to record their own, that would become the one played back to the next passer-by. An audio memory that functions like an echo (who in Greek mythology, you might remember, was acusmatic), that gets substituted by the new recordings. The archive of the interactions, forms a participatory sound map of the space it inhabited, a collaborative depiction of the street

This collection of recordings is visible as a sequence and available for anyone on a webpage, where one could listen to all the recordings, and see all the background information about them (the present metadata: Location, date, hour, second that the record button was pressed).

Further findings and observations will be revealed with the experiments that follow, and thus gradually tell the story of the project.

Sofia

Second experiment: December 2013

Location: Angel Kanchev street, Sofia, Bulgaria

After Rotterdam my path took direction towards Sofia and among the important items in my bag was a raspberry pi and a home brew amplifier. Situations occurred already at the airport, where my luggage attracted more than the regular attention. And as hard as it is for me to admit it, the fact that a girl carried around electronics made things a bit easier, so I embraced it.

In Sofia, after roaming the city for a few days I found a great host location. A hostel, in the middle of the city centre, on a busy but still small, even charming street, with many pedestrians and few cars. The hostel keepers provided their facade, along with electricity and internet connection.

The intention was to let the box stay there as much as possible while I would reside in Bulgaria. That meant it has to be secure enough to survive the night streets in Sofia, as it was rather curious to see what the night time brings, that did not get revealed previously in Rotterdam.

With only a few tools and the raspberry pi at my disposal, I had to employ a DIY strategy. The present parts were: most importantly the brain and heart – raspberry pi with an SD card with the python code that glued everything together, a big LED and an amplifier for the speaker. Everything else had yet to be discovered. A speaker, ripped of an old radio, a desktop microphone, stripped bare of all the accompanying plastic and found buttons at a local electronics shop. So much for the inside, but what would be perfect to wrap this all up in a unified shape? With no workshop within reach, neither much possible help due to winter holidays, the only option was a big building supplies hyperstore (Baumarkt). After a quick tour one cannot escape but be drawn by one interesting yet rarely purchased for personal use object- the cashbox. Small but strong, it was perfect to endure bulgarian curiosity, therefore become a shell for the hardware. After some hand drilling, the box was painted pink. The meaning of such a colour could be decoded ambiguously, since times were not so pink in Bulgaria and there was a lot of political tension, with a strong presence on the streets.

After some small efforts, an autonomous street object was created. This gave rise to imagine a possibility for other people to do the same , creating situation for participation in the urban environment, making room to play in urban space.



Unlike Rotterdam, Sofia's box triggered more interaction. That time of the year was an ambiguous one, there was holiday mood, mixed with anger and disappointment from a whole summer of protests against the government in vain. And so it began. A repeated observation occurred, in the fact that it takes certain time for the object to integrate within the space before interaction occurs. As if the object has to be remotely investigated by the passers-by. So they would pass once, twice and the box would still be there. Its persistence, somehow proved respect and then curiosity would take over. After one person approaches, then usually it becomes a chain reaction, and one triggers the other. A very simple mechanism that functions in many layers of our everyday lives.

The box remained on the street for a week and the more time it was there, the more frequent the input became. The content had incredible diversity. From greetings and wishes for happy holidays and better times, to hoots and shouts for the resignation of the government. Beatbox performances, announcements of children's misbehaviour, singing. The more time spent on the street, the box proved to function as a sonic depiction of the street it inhabited. A sound map covering over a week, collaboratively created by the simple audio contributions of strangers.

22 December 2013 , 10:29 – *Resign, resign, resign, resign, resign!*

For less than 10 seconds, a young man whispers five times to the government to resign.

He is out almost out of breath on the fifth time. It is difficult to whisper, when one wants to shout.

A very strong message, a clear metaphor for the political and social situation in the country at the moment. The urge to protest and shout out, squeezed by uncertainty, fear and the need to survive.

24 December 2013 20:32 – *C'mon (silently) (loud) Mmmmy christmas!* in two voices, a man and woman try to be positive on christmas eve, unfortunately their performance seems rather staged and artificial.

26 December 16:38 – *Where are we headed to, wheeere?*distant laugh....followed by a question asked by the girl making the recording to her companion.....*do I have to elaborate on this...?*

That is the last recorded message in Sofia, before the box got removed. Ending with an open question, and as if nobody from the passers-by could answer.

Contrary to expectations, the box did not get vandalized, nor collected cursing and insults. Night time remained silent. Perhaps the cold winter nights emptied the streets.

When the box had to be unmounted, a lot of requests were received, from random people living close by and especially the people that hosted the box, asking for it to stay. It had become part of the place. And the recordings, like the toys in chocolate eggs, making the passer-by eager to reveal the content, even if there is a chance it may be pleasing. Well, maybe next time it will be.

Rotterdam, semi-public

Third experiment: January-February 2014

Location: Cafe de Bel, Gerard Scholtenstraat 61-B, 3035 SE Rotterdam, the Netherlands

The box spent ten days in a bar, a semi-public space in the North of Rotterdam. Since the presence of the box in a space shaped a sound, or better a voice map, next locations would be other urban dwellings. After the street came the bar. Varying from attempts to make poems, dirty comments to short fiction.

28 January 20:32 – a man tries to start a story: “Once upon a time there was a poem which was hidden and when it came outside it was killed without saying one word...”

28 January 20:51 – his recording is killed by the ambience recorded in the bar, and not a word being said. Presence is evident, people are talking in the background, the noise of the bar is present, but nobody addresses the recording. The poem is killed.

In the bar, where a lot of people are present at the same time, the box starts being used as a megaphone, to make different announcements, like a message board. A typical example would be:

31 January 18:06 – “It is my birthday today.” A woman proudly but quietly lets someone discover her recording and perhaps look for her among the people in the bar. Or at least get some greetings back.

The way the community uses the device is very similar to the *Say something nice* project by Improv Everywhere, a New York City-based prank collective that describe themselves to cause scenes of chaos and joy in public places. The project is a wooden lectern with a megaphone holster. The lectern is placed in public spaces around New York and then left alone, giving the opportunity to amplify their voices to “say something nice.” That project is different in many ways. The box, unlike the lectern remains in a space for a long time, which lets it become part of the environment, blend in, be discovered and gain the trust of the passers-by. The lectern is an immediate symbol associated with announcements, protestors, authority, and then, being directed as once more, with the invitation to say something nice. The project exists solely as video documentation, and looks like the negative shout-outs were cut out, or the interaction it triggered was mainly artificially positive. I find the poetry of every day to not only be happy and positive, but mixed with dark, obscene, loud content. And it becomes interesting when these moment mix and trigger each other and there is a duality, a certain struggle.

09 February 00:02 – a man, trying to sound respectful, faking a deep voice, admits:

"I don't like a fat nigger, absolutely not!"

That is reality, not only warm wishes for a nice day.

Followed by recordings about love, loneliness, stories about murder and even someone discovering a Flemish accent and trying to find the one responsible for it.

After the experiments in Sofia and Rotterdam, the project was somehow very much an auto portrait. An open microphone, for people willing to use it. In this sense it was related to a project by the Serbian artist Zoran Todorovic. *Noise* is a video work created by collecting footage from three different locations with an automated camera, collecting the statements of the public. (*Noise, Zoran Todorovic, 1998*) Of course a fundamental difference is the existence of an image. In his work the image is of a greater importance, the performances in front of the camera. The non anonymity. Being created in 1998 in Serbia, the project lacks the burden of surveillance and identity. Now, sixteen years later, the preformativity in front of a camera has become way more cultivated and parroted. That is why my belief is that with the lack of an image, the truthfulness could be greater.

When the box has to be moved from the bar, the hosts are not willing to give it away. It has become a pleasant object for them, piling up every-day comments, revealing a poetry of the everyday that is present in a place but rarely registered.



A similar comment came from all spaces that the box temporarily inhabited. The need to talk to another place, a sort of distributed dialogue with another location. That idea, makes the listen moment more exciting, it includes numerous imaginary places, numerous fictional people.

A turning point

Listening to the recordings from Cafe de bel was difficult, as they are mainly in Dutch. It is confusing and enchanting at the same time. It was a moment when the feeling of estrangement from all the places that I find myself became obvious. Could that discomfort be transformed into an excitement by engaging different locations, different cities, countries? Will such a simple spectacle, taken for granted, possibly become exciting when placed in an opposite context to what we are used to? Namely on the street, connecting us to unknown places and its dwellers, rather in our own pocket, connected to friends who pass through their usual routes. These questions led me to start working towards a network of connected voice boxes, facilitating a 'slow dialogue', voices travelling unpredictable routes through various

cityscapes.

The functionality of the device had to be changed, so it was modified so that each box functions as a node of centralized network. As soon as a recording is made, it could be listened to on any of the boxes, until a new one is made and becomes the one played back on all nodes.

Using my own network of people I know and places I am somehow connected to, boxes appeared in Sofia, Vienna, Amsterdam, Zagreb. Similarly, Kate Rich's project 'Feral Trade' is grocery business and public experiment, that utilizes social networks to trade goods (*Feral Trade*, Kate Rich, 2003) A similarity between both projects is the replacement of the idea of efficiency with the richness of the biography of the interactions, concentrated in their metadata. So that the value of the content is increased by the routes it had taken (both in the shipped goods and in case of the audio recordings in leaveamessage). e shipped goods and in the case of the audio recordings in leaveamessage). What is different, however, is that rather than constantly shifting and dynamically changing routes (in *Feral Trade*), Leaveamessage relies on the hospitality of a location and is to be settled long-term, so that it could be discovered and become part of the space it inhabits.

The difficulties of keeping a DIY network function are many. Living in times of plug and play devices and less engagement to public space, installing a physical object, and maintaining it is a rather problematic task. It also requires a certain degree of devotion on behalf of the host space, along with a basic handiness – qualities that should not be underestimated.

Despite all these problematic points, the network has made its start and boxes are already installed.

Leaveamessage in Amsterdam, hosted by artist-run space



As soon as there were two nodes, the 'narrative' and rhythmic flow of the recordings emerges from the network topology. When the locations get mixed and one follows the other, the excitement to press the listen button and try to understand, imagine where and who left the message grows.

Leave a message in Vienna, Museums Quartier, hosted by artist collective monochrom.at



A link and inspiration is drawn from the community memory project, the first public, computerized bulletin board system, created in 1973 in a student-established record store in Berkeley, The United States. People could leave typed messages and browse through the already existing ones. Anyone could add a message, attach keywords to it, and find messages. Lee Felsenstein, one of the initiators of the projects recalls in an interview that a lot of content moved to this, as he calls it in a video interview, 'better technology' at the time. (*Lee Felsenstein: The First Community Memory, 2011, Computer History Museum*) Leave a message does not provide at all a better technology, on the contrary, there are all kinds of other very efficient technologies available to transmit messages among each other. The situation possible in this project is to leave a message that bounces in between different static places, until being discovered. It is the contrary to being instant, though sometimes, it may be the case that two places connect instantly for a brief moment in time. The fact that one can only hear the last recording in the chain, as opposed to searching by tag in the community memory project, amplifies the beauty of the transiency of the everyday.

Leave a message in Zagreb, hosted by artist-run bar Cica



Leave a message in Sofia, hosted by bar Bar in a famous spot in the Crystal Garden in the centre of the city



It is surprising to me the existing excitement that one may be heard by a stranger elsewhere in the world, having in mind that we are constantly connected and it is an ubiquitous event.

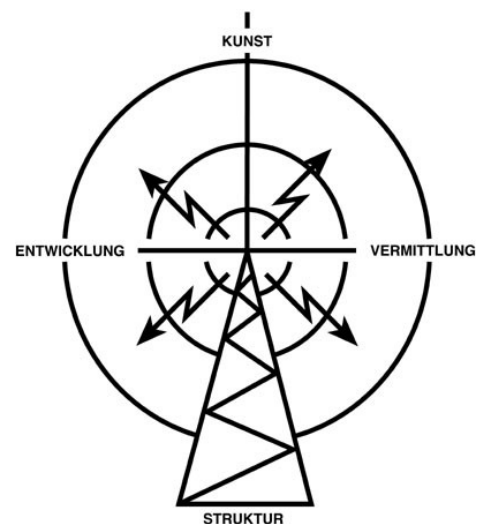
Back in 1980 Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz's 'Hole in Space' was an exciting technological spectacle. (*Hole in Space, Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, 1980*) Leave a message provides space for play and discovery rather than a clear communication channel. Interesting is that 'Hole in Space' was also to be discovered and it was not officially announced, but be gradually spread word by word. To me this is an important poetic element that adds to the excitement in the interaction in public space.

CH3

DIY network (im)possible?

On the 29 May 2014 a box is installed in Linz, parallel to the project being showcased in the Art Meets Radical Openness Festival. An event that gathers a technologically savvy crowd, discussing the possibilities and impossibilities of independence, freedom, privacy, autonomy in our networked society.

The project is met by enthusiasm. It is easily understood not only conceptually but technically as well, which had not occurred in any of the other host locations until this moment. The leaveamessage box in Linz is hosted on the facade of Stadtwerkstatt – center of culture and communication that has been located since 1990 in Alt-Urfahr. The place holds events and performances and other cultural and artistic activities. The building of the Stadtwerkstatt also houses the independent Linz local radio station Radio FRO and the art and culture server servus.at - whose team are hosting the box.



During the festival, people show interest in making their own box, involving their location into the network. Of course such interest and possibility can easily come from people connected with hackerspaces and other organisations strongly connected to art and technology. For such spaces and the communities engaged, it is easy to

facilitate, host, maintain and even build their own devices. They have access to the knowledge and equipment to do so. The project could only benefit from such communities picking it up, as they could also improve it and modify it according to their own needs and ideas. And the experimental network takes the places from the inside, out and from the virtual to the real space and engages them discreetly with other locations. It intertwines communities and passers-by that inhabit together urban environments but perhaps have no reason or urge to address each other.



Installing an object in public space for a long term period is a task considered difficult and intrusive. It becomes a question whether it is acceptable to install something different than a post box on the street. Simply because urban environments are not meant to host anything citizen-initiated, especially an electronic object that requires electricity. Urban infrastructures are designed to facilitate corporate and authority objects in public space. It becomes even more of an obstacle when the object requires an internet connection. Even though the whole planet is wired, above and under, cables are meant to be hidden. They reach to our homes and only then and only there we have access to them. And as for public space, it facilitated by governments and companies. Bringing your own device to the streets is ubiquitous, but it is rarely separated from ourselves, always dependent on being charged, almost never left outside for a long period. Constantly protected from being stolen or vandalized.

It is interesting to follow how long can such a DIY network exist in public space. How much dedication and enthusiasm it requires and will it be met trough the host

locations? I am interested to pursue possibilities to embed, electronics into public space. By this I mean to use existing spaces on buildings to provide place for enclosing the electronics of the Leaveamessage box. An example would be building mechanisms into doors, walls, so that they are accessible from the outside, and to the public, and no external object that is easy to break is involved. Thus it will be part of the streets, rather than being placed onto them. It will also free the passer-by from the distraction from an external object facilitating the interaction.

This is reflected in the way I present my project inside the context of the gallery space in TENT, where I will embed two buttons, speaker and microphone into the wall of the gallery. This will allow the visitor discover it and accept it as part of the space, and connect through it with the other objects in the network.

With the possibility to connect different objects to each other and to the internet, I wonder whether it is possible to also make room for creating poetic moments rather than connecting our heating system to our mobile phone.

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