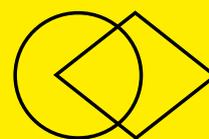


WE_COSMOS

Artistic action and research in urban space

Fabian Chyle-Silvestri and Michael Lazar



Abstract

WE_COSMOS was a transdisciplinary project realized in 2021, which – conceived for the partner cities Essen (Germany) and Tel Aviv (Israel) – explored the interdependence of bodies and urban space. The focus was on measuring, visualizing and embodying physical vibrational patterns from both cities. These were further processed and transformed in artistic, performative and participatory formats and shared with visitors in the public space. The artistic research of WE_COSMOS led to a new kinesthetic way of experiencing the urban environment, transforming the body from a passive participant in – to an active designer of – the urban space. Based on the practical experiences and methods of WE_COSMOS, strategies of artistic work and research in the city were explicated and their implications for artistic practice and research as well as cultural education were described.



1. Preliminary Considerations

WE_COSMOS – an artistic research project initiated by Fabian Chyle–Silvestri and Michael Lazar – dealt with the interdependence of bodies and atmosphere in different artistic-performative formats between October 2020 and October 2022. Within the different parts of the project, the different disciplines – physics, dance/choreography, performance, visual arts and social sciences – met and synergies for art and research were developed.



The WE_COSMOS team investigated the interdependence between body and atmosphere in urban space specifically in the context of the interaction of physical vibrations and the body. Vibrations can be seen as the link between all components of space – because everything that is in space vibrates and is thus in motion. Even what we describe as stable is not static and is constantly in flux. The vibrations – and the resulting movements – are measurable. Like in a mobile, all movements in space potentially have effects on all other bodies present. These effects – even if they are not perceptible to the naked eye or ear – are measurable and representable via geophysical means.

From these considerations, the WE_COSMOS team derived the following two principles – narrowing down the research interest:

1. everything in public space vibrates and is always in motion.
2. all movements in the space change the space itself. That is, moving bodies are constantly actively or passively shaping the space.



Based on these basic assumptions, the WE_COSMOS team formulated the following research questions:

1. how can vibrations in urban space be experienced and translated through performative work? The team was particularly interested in the perception of the atmospheric in public space, i.e., that which is initially imperceptible but present.
2. How can urban space change and be experienced anew through artistic and choreographic methods? Here, the focus was particularly on the active design and appropriation of urban space.

WE_COSMOS investigated these question within artistic formats and almost exclusively in the public space, with residents and interested visitors. Therefore, WE_COSMOS is methodically located in the field of artistic research and performative approaches of social research (cf. Gergen/Gergen 2010).



2. Theoretical Classification

2.1 Artistic Research

Performing and performing arts ideally make use of fewer recipes to produce artistic results; they use an exploratory attitude to research, test, and redevelop themes and forms. According to Bernhard Badura (cf. 2015: 23–25), artistic research takes place in different forms in the developmental steps in performative art: in collaborations, in „sharing of expertise,“ in artistic reflection and development work, or in staged laboratory situations. WE_COSMOS followed Klein’s broad framing (cf. 2015: 47): „Research can be called artistic when it employs the artistic mode as a means of gaining knowledge.“ The artistic mode can be set in motion by a wide variety of practices – not only art-specific, but also analogous to art – such as experimenting, intervening, noting, fragmenting, dynamizing, etc. (cf. Freygarten/Struck 2017; Badura et al. 2015). The impetus of artistic research is to be artistic and researching at the same time in all phases of the development project. The goal here is to transform existing knowledge and integrate other knowledge (cf. Bippus 2015).

2.2 Body – Performativity – Choreography

The concept of „performativity“ goes back to, among others, John Austin’s speech act theory (cf. 1972) and describes the reality-constituting character of all bodily and linguistic actions (cf. Beaugrande de 1998). Accordingly, bodily action establishes realities – for the self and its environments. Performative actions can be perceived and read in more than one way, creating a state of co-presence with the bodies that are actively or passively involved in the performative context.

A pioneer in the conceptualization of performativity as a sociological term was sociologist Erving Goffman with his publication *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956). Bodies inevitably perform roles, norms, and choreographies in social contexts, thereby structuring and organizing them (cf. *ibid.* 1959). Even if they wanted to: people cannot not perform. Based on this assumption, all formats of WE_COSMOS were understood as more or less subtle, performative interventions in public space that inevitably lead to adjustments and changes in the self-organization of bodies.

Analogous to these considerations, Gabriele Klein (cf. 2012) also defines contemporary choreography from the perspective of dance studies as a performative framework that organizes movement in time and space and generates social and cultural practices. Thus, the concept of choreography is inevitably linked to geo- and biopolitical questions: What spaces are appropriated and used, and in what ways? What footprints do we as a society leave in our surrounding space? Who is allowed to be mobile, when and how?

2.3 City, space and body

Since urban space is a direct environment of the human body, the body and urban space are inevitably connected. According to Richard Sennett (cf. 1994), the human body shapes how individuals view the city. According to Sennett, self-perception and understanding of the body play an important role in how cities are designed and ultimately built. The city can thus be seen as an extension of the human body. The interconnectedness of urban space and the body is evident in its effect on physical well-being and health: cities can have a negative

impact on overall health due to factors such as increased pollution (cf. Galea/Vlahov 2005), and poor urban design can be associated with an increase in depressive symptomatology (cf. Sundquist/Frank/Sundquist 2004; Penn et al. 2010; Rautio et al. 2017). According to Sennett, the „modern“ body is an object that passively moves through the city and rarely interacts with it. Nor does the modern city, for the most part, invite community, even when people inevitably come together (as in subways, train stations, or shopping malls). This is described in the discourse as a core problem that can have serious consequences for people living in cities (see Jacobs 1961: 196; Sennett 1994). The COVID-19 pandemic has also forced urban planners to rethink the city. Concepts, such as the 15-minute city, which focuses on community and the availability of all infrastructures within a 15-minute radius, have gained popularity (cf. Moreno et al. 2021; Pozoukidou/Chatziyiannaki 2021; Allam et al. 2022). Within this framework, the place of the body in urban space is being re-examined.

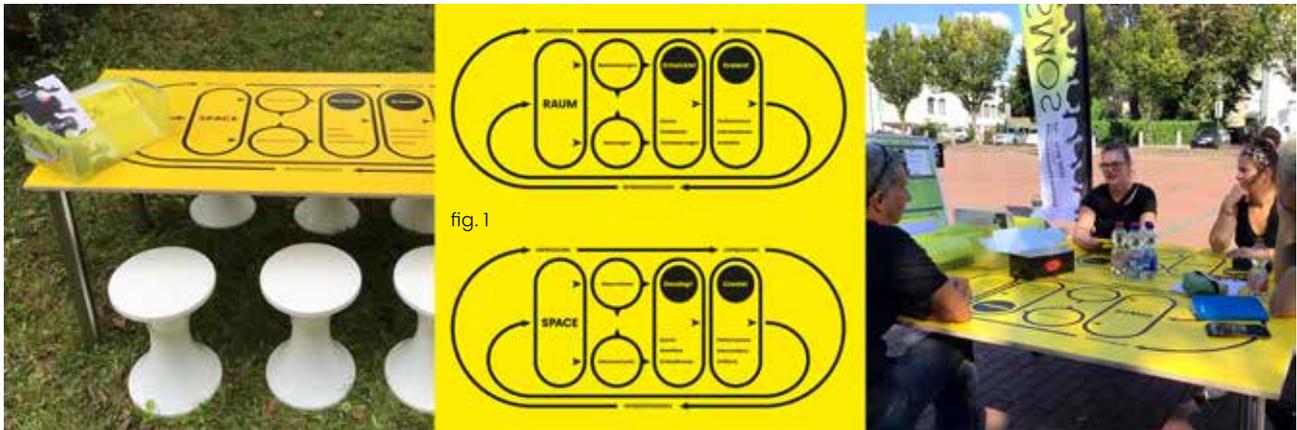


2.4 Art as social practice

Since the 1980s of the last century, there have been wide-ranging discourses on the social and societal aspects within art production. At the center of these discourses are participation, inclusion, diversity, and cultural formats that reach out to broader segments of society and cover a wider variety of lifeworlds. Matarasso (cf. 2019) – a central representative of community art – distinguishes here between Participatory and Community Art. While Participatory is more guided by institutional and political interest, Community Art is more autonomous and develops its projects mostly with horizontal hierarchies in collective contexts. In this conglomerate, the focus in art production shifts: away from the artistic product and the genius artists and towards art as social practice: „[Social practice] [...] democratizes the construct, making the artist into an individual whose speciality includes working with society in a professional capacity.“ (Helguera 2011: 3)

3. Conceptual Framing

For WE_COSMOS, the team developed a multi-step methodological working model that was taken into account in all project formats (see fig.1). This can be used as a blueprint to be expanded for urban space projects.



Step 1: Space

Definition or delimitation of the space in which the work is to be done.

Step 2: Observing and surveying

Develop and/or select forms of observation and, where appropriate, survey instruments that provide information and inspiration for research and artistic practice.

Step 3: Develop

Translate observations into concrete physical material (movement, objects, or artifacts).

Step 4: Design

The material is returned to the space. The performative material and/or artifacts are arranged in the urban space. What has been developed in the space is returned to and changes, the space and the community.

This multi-step methodological working model is based on the basic assumptions of WE_COSMOS: the space leaves impressions on the bodies. Through performative action, bodies in turn leave impressions in the public space and inevitably change it. The interrelation between body and space is also reflected in the conceptual framing: step 4 changes the space and invites to observe, develop, design this new space in an unusual way and iteratively resume the research cycle.

WE_COSMOS executed all project steps in the public space, sharing everything directly with the space and with the people present there. The team considered all actions - regardless of the project step (observing, surveying, developing, designing) - as performative interventions and designs. For example, vibration measurements in public spaces often led to conversations with passersby who perceived the actions as „different from the norm“ and became curious. The resulting conversations created new realities - the collection of vibrations and the mediation on this can thus be described as a performative act.

4. Project course

Step 1: Space

For the artistic research, the WE_COSMOS team chose the twin cities of Essen and Tel Aviv. The English „Twin City“ refers to a similarity – if not a near sameness (as in identical twins) – of the cities. Of interest was a joint consideration of the results, surveys and/or experiences of two urban spaces more than 4000 kilometers apart. For Essen, the team decided on the district of Altenessen, where Karlsplatz, Marktplatz and Schurenbachhalde were the central working spaces.

Step 2: Observing and surveying

The central step of any artistic and scientific research process is to make observations, collect data, and archive the material collected. Material can be anything: conversations, self-observations, images, records, or any type of scientific data. In artistic processes, the first research step is also the research in and through the artistic medium. In WE_COSMOS, the three central access points were physical vibrations, spatial observations, and conversations. All observations were recorded in images, words or graphics and archived in dedicated WE_COSMOS archive boxes.



Surveys

A central method of observation in WE_COSMOS was the survey of vibrations at different locations. With a laptop, sensor and the appropriate software, vibrations can be collected from all objects in a given space. Visualizations of the measurement data can be direct (i.e. x,y and z as a function of time) or manipulated to provide more „artistic“ outputs. In the first phase of the project, the team conducted simultaneous surveys in Altenessen and Tel Aviv at corresponding locations: Altenessen Market Square and Rabin Square Tel Aviv or Karlsbrücke Colliery in Essen and Rowing Center Bridge in Tel Aviv.

Spatial observations

Based on different parameters the WE_COSMOS team developed possibilities to observe the urban space multimodally. Observers positioned themselves at a specific place in the public space. Observations were recorded in words, scribbles, or graphics and conducted with eyes open or closed. Observation impulses were directed, for example, at actions in the space, at sounds, at lines, at spatial movements or at body postures.

Conducting conversations (on site)

In the first phase, the WE_COSMOS team had conversations with the people who were in each place about their relationship to it: Why are they here? Does the place have meaning to them? What is missing in the place? What would they like to change?



Step 3: Develop

Notations

The vibration data were further processed within WE_COSMOS into different visualizations, in order to make the vibrational patterns more accessible to the general public. The visualizations gave an access to the vibration patterns at the respective place, concretized and illustrated them. In the further course of the project, the developed visualizations also served as a basis for musical, choreographic and performative actions.



Movement workshops in public space

In the run-up to the project, several movement workshops were offered in public spaces in Altenessen. In the workshops, participants made their own observations of space, transformed them into choreographic and performative instructions, and thus intervened in urban space. The workshops were an opportunity to share and make available ideas and practices. At the same time, it was a way for the WE_COSMOS team to incorporate the knowledge of the participants into the development process and to synchronize knowledge.

WE_COSMIC-exchange

The de-hierarchization of the development processes also requires to take into account that other researchers have worked on similar themes before or are currently do so. It is also important to take on board their perspectives and experiences. In the WE_COSMIC-EXCHANGE a series of conversations, which took place between February and June 2021, the team realized conversations with colleagues (Jo Parkes, Xavier e Roy, Tam Hunt and others) on relevant aspects of the research. These were realized digitally and were accessible on the WE_COSMOS website.

Step 4: Design

Over a period of eight days in September 2021, WE_COSMOS installed itself at three different locations in public space in Altenessen as part of WE_COSMOS' performance week. Every day from 12pm to 8pm, the WE_COSMOS team shared different formats of artistic research practices. Following the motto „All Bodies Welcome“, all formats were open to all interested parties.

Open studios

Every day, the WE_COSMOS team continued to examine the research questions and developed artistic forms in which interested people could participate. Two yellow tables (with project information, laptop, printer, writing material) and the WE_COSMOS archive were the contact points where interested people could familiarize themselves with the project and exchange ideas with WE_COSMOS participants in an open studio format. In this way, all phases from research to analysis to implementation were open to any person who wanted to participate and become part of the WE_COSMOS team themselves. A specially developed research guide as well as the collected practices in the archive boxes allowed for a direct entry into artistic explorations. Thus, the project was not about representational actions in public space (i.e., the WE_COSMOS team performs for passersby), but rather about performative actions with the public, in the public space, for the public.



WalkTalk Performances

The format of the WalkTalk performances was a performative walk of two (or more) communicating participants who set out simultaneously in Essen and Tel Aviv (cf. Lazar/Chyle-Silvestri 2022). Participants communicated during the walk using a voice-over-IP service (e.g., Meta's WhatsApp platform), which also enabled video conferencing. After choosing the starting point, a mutually agreed direction was set for the beginning of the walk. Each participant could then

suggest changing direction – turning left, turning right, or going straight. Only paths that were available to all participants could be taken. Thus, joint negotiation was the basis for moving along the same route through both cities. On the walk, participants could invite each other to „perceptual pauses“ or performative actions to experience the urban space in a (more) kinesi-
sthetic way.

Community Art Workshops

Different community art workshops were held daily, such as dance/performance in public space, parkour workshops and music workshops, to offer another transfer and participation opportunity. In the performance workshops, the focus was mostly on testing the WE_COSMOS practices and the physical and performative appropriation of the urban space, similar to what was done beforehand. Based on the vibration measurements, visible movement patterns and the architectural conditions, participants developed choreographies that represented alternative ways of moving or using space. Mini workshops also arose spontaneously from the interest of passers by, in which encounters took place in the context of WE_COSMOS.



Conversations

Comparable to the format of the WE_COSMIC-EXCHANGE, the team invited representatives from local politics, local initiatives and cultural workers to several discussions during the performance week. Here, an exchange about the subjective perceptions of the city, about urban design as well as alternative forms and visions of the (re)appropriation of public space was stimulated.

Performances

Two of the interdisciplinary workshops (performance, music, dance) led to announced performances in the evening. All participants of the workshop could also be part of the performance. The intention of this format was to bring together larger groups of artists with visitors in a co-creative process (cf. Matarasso 2019).



Spatial-sculptural designs.

In addition to the performative interventions, the WE_COSMIC team developed spatial designs based on the visualizations of the vibration patterns. The two-dimensional translations were translated into a three-dimensional spatial sculpture using simple materials such as ropes, strings, and masking tape. The resulting spatialities were subsequently used and further exploited choreographically and performatively.



Exhibition

At the end of the performance week, all artistic formats, results and artifacts were again made available in a compact exhibition format with performative interventions.

In addition to the presence on site, part of the performance week was also offered as a live-stream and the project was documented audiovisually.

5. Results

The formats of WE_COSMOS offered the participants different approaches to experience vibrations and atmosphere in the urban space. Here, the open studio played a central role in the performance week: based on the vibrational measurements, visitors made their own notations, used the observation invitations or the kinesthetic accesses to engage concretely with the atmosphere in their neighborhood. The resulting drawings, movements or conversation transcripts indicate that participants used the urban space perceptually experientially – and not just functionally. Again and again, we as project managers received feedback from participants (active and receptive) that their view of their own district was broadened and that possibilities for alternative uses of public space were revealed. Both the feedback and the artifacts created, show that physical-performative work expands the perception of the atmospheric in public space. This is obvious since the bodily-performative approach strongly addresses sensory perception and the sensorimotor – both areas of perception through which atmospheric is also processed.

The visitors of WE_COSMOS inevitably put themselves into a performative context: either as an actively performing body or as a co-present receiving body. The actions of the participants, e.g. of the WalkTalk performances, could be perceived as alternative ways of shaping the urban space due to their unusual wayfinding or other movement sequences. In the development of three-dimensional sculptures, participants were able to actively shape public space: For example, part of a (public) lawn became a spider's web, or the cracks in the market square became a stone and string relief. Even the comments of the passers-by, who expressed their irritation, showed engagement with the urban space: analogous to Goffman (cf. 1956), the norm and the social choreography in social interaction is perceived when it is disturbed: as an opportunity and potential beginning of alternative action. In this respect, WE_COSMOS provided real material on how artistic and choreographic interventions can temporarily reshape urban space.

In general, it can be said that the combination of approaches in WE_COSMOS can be described as variations of kinesthetic appropriation of urban space. The body contemplates and experiences the city – it turns from a passive to an active body.

All actions within WE_COSMOS were understood as performative interventions that potentially question the implicit and explicit set of rules of the respective urban space. This automatically creates a demarcation between „us and them“. This was always taken into account and attempts were made to establish co-creative work at eye level. Important strategies here were 1) to ensure different and low-threshold participation opportunities, 2) to constantly synchronize knowledge so that all participants were on the same level, and 3) to take time or allow time.

The team considered the latter strategies in particular to be central to the success of WE_COSMOS. The fact that the team installed themselves in the urban space for eight hours a day over eight days allowed residents to slowly approach the project and decide if and how they wanted to participate. The process that the outsiders have to lose their strangeness and the (partly involuntary) visitors have to transform themselves into welcome guests has to be considered in such projects.

6. Transfer

The pandemic situation temporarily changed the guidelines of the national funding landscape, at least in Germany. Projects conceived outside of theater spaces, which until then had led a shadowy existence, came into focus as a low-risk form of art production. As a consequence, urban space was increasingly used for testing, development and performance in the performing arts. WE_COSMOS pursued a co-creative approach with passers-by, residents and visitors. That is, the focus on „we share space with people“ was the artistic and exploratory practice. The team considers the results of this approach to be artistically and socially valuable. In contact WITH urban space, different processes emerge than when artistic practice is developed FOR urban space.

With regard to research and scientific practice, it seems useful to think of knowledge production also horizontally and to integrate other forms of knowledge into the research process. The WE_COSMIC team consistently enriched the artistic process with scientific research perspectives and vice versa. This also appears to be an important development for science. In particular - focused on research on urban and social space - scientific processes and results need to generate not only data and statistics, but artistic and cultural forms usable by society as well.

With regard to cultural education, WE_COSMOS can be an inspiration to enable participation and access for different people within a project. Even if this has not been widely adopted, what counts here is the option and the active invitation. The clear connection of artistic and scientific themes and forms in WE_COSMOS points to the fact that artistic forms do not only serve representation, display and performance. Far more important is their significance in expanding social practices, possibilities of communion, and perspectives of learning and development.

It would have been interesting to realize WE_COSMOS symmetrically in Tel Aviv as well. For financial reasons, this could not be implemented in full. This would certainly have further deepened the local and global aspects of the project. Also, planned WE_COSMOS actions at schools and with young people could not be realized for organizational reasons. This would have provided in particular more information about the educational potential of such projects.



7. Conclusion

WE_COSMOS has continued to vibrate over the long project period and has successfully set urban spaces in motion in various places. Of course, one could say: it has reached too few people. However, the idea of WE_COSMOS to create different points of connection has reached many: visitors, passers-by, residents ... some connections were created explicitly and were long and lasting - others were moving impressions of an urban space that offers bodies other possibility.



8. Acknowledgements

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9. WE_COSMOS Team

Choreographer and performer Dr. Fabian Chyle-Silvestri and geophysicist and multimedia artist Dr. Michael Lazar met at the Arts and Science in Motion conference in 2014. Since then, they have been exchanging ideas, specifically about how bodies leave traces in their environments, cultures, urban spaces, and political practices, and how these leave traces and imprints in bodies.

Michael Lazar, Ph. D., has worked as a professional artist for over 20 years. His work ranges from photography to performance art and installations. As an sculptor he developed an

unique way of sculpting: creating figurative work from sheet metal without the use of heat and the traditional casting method. In addition to his successful work as an artist, he received his Ph. D. in Geophysics and Planetary Science from Tel Aviv University in 2004. He is an expert in marine geology and geophysics and teaches at the University of Haifa, Israel. His simultaneous embodiment of artist and scientist makes him a popular interlocutor in discourses concerned with the drawing and crossing of boundaries and the blending of these two fields. Further information: www.michael-lazar.com

Fabian Chyle-Silvestri, PhD, studied dance and choreography at the Amsterdam Theatre School and dance/movement therapy at Columbia College Chicago. He has been a freelance choreographer and performer since 1995. Since that time, he has created more than 25 full-length productions that interact dance, theater, music, performance, and visual art in idiosyncratic ways. He has received numerous prizes and awards, including a scholarship from the Kunststiftung Baden-Württemberg, conceptual funding from the Fonds Darstellende Künste and the state of Baden-Württemberg, and several times the Theaterpreis der Stadt Stuttgart. In addition to his artistic work, Chyle-Silvestri specialized in dance/movement therapy work in the penal system, especially in offense reconstruction and movement therapy accompaniment of sexual and violent offenders. Under the label e/m/o processing® he developed various competence trainings for the penal system. In 2016, he completed his doctorate on „Body- and movement-based interventions with male offenders“ at the University of Witten-Herdecke. His research interests focus on dance in the context of arts education, dance therapy, somatic practice and artistic research. Between 2017 and 2022, head of the dance department at the Academy of Cultural Education of the Federal Government and the State of NRW. Since 2022 professorship for dance/movement therapy at the SRH University of Applied Sciences Heidelberg. Further information: www.fabianchyle.de

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