

INTERVENTION INTO THE REAL

WHAT IS IT?

Art-based interventions into the everyday have been a common genre of performance art and of activism since the 1970s. They can become a set-up for *Participatory Art Based Research*, if intervention and observation, action and reflection are put into relation and context around the intervention as such. Art-based interventions into the everyday can therefore be thought of as a format of action research (Lewin 1946), or as a “Reallabor” (Groß/Hoffmann-Riem/Krohn 2015), a more recent format of participatory research¹ that has emerged in the context of green technology and its implementation.

Rather than aiming at public attention, as for instance the Viennese Actionists did with their art interventions in the 1960s, this art-based research² often serves a supporting function in local transformations. In proximity to intervention research (Kratochwill et al. 2012), this research set-up gives new impulses to a given field that can then be evaluated. The involvement might take up an activist position or follow an impetus to share and explore an alternative perspective on general social questions. The intervention can also facilitate the emergence of new practical solutions, which can then also be seen as research outcomes³. The format offers a possibility to understand how unique conditions shape social transformation. From this perspective, struggles resulting in social transformation can also be seen, analysed and valued as research. Social transformations can be supported, facilitated and presented through artistic means, as in Michael Ziehl’s research project *Building Symposia Gängeviertel*¹ (2015), which was located within the social and political transformations in the Hamburg neighbourhood Gängeviertel (Ziehl 2018).

CONTEXT

1 Participatory research: To make research more inclusive, more democratic, is an important task in societies that are increasingly based on commercialised knowledge production. Opportunities are created and strategies legitimised by research. Therefore, it is crucial that research practices are made accessible to everybody. When research is opened to the many, this opening does not only follow ethical principles but improves the quality of research as such. Even if a research set-up or design is shaped by a single researcher and participation within it will never be completely horizontal. It will still provide opportunities for people to become co-researchers who would usually not be able to participate actively in official research processes. That brings PABR close to approaches and methods of participatory research and action research or its progressions (see Reason/Bradbury 2013), which ask for research as “social action” (Lewin 1946). A contribution of the (performing) arts to these approaches is their expertise in organising participatory processes, which in turn can create models for new types of social action, new structures and new contracts.

2 Art-based research: *Participatory Art Based Research* differs from other approaches and methodologies of art-based research by situating research neither exclusively within the arts – as artistic research about and for the arts (Borgdorff 2006), nor mainly in between art and science – as producing a different kind of knowledge that is disqualified by established academic research standards (Busch 2016). See also PABR – What is PABR and what is the online-resource about?

3 Knowledge production: PABR formats and designs are governed by the pursuit of a question, a desire, a need or by the attempt to find a solution for a problem. This initial framing poses a functional background for the researchers to evaluate the outcomes of the performative events and research activities, and therefore produce specific answers to the functioning of hypotheses or working solutions. For the evaluation, several moments of presenting, analysing, reflecting and discussing results are implemented within the operational steps. Results can include solutions, knowledge, theories, practices, artefacts,



Intervention into the Real can also have a more ethnographic, less activist approach, in which the intervention aims at changing practices in a public experiment for the sake of researching the performativity of the everyday, as in the research project by Sebastian Matthias (*groove space series* 2014-2016^{ll}), who intervened in the choreography of club dancing in Berlin to investigate figurations of groove (Matthias 2018).^a

CORPUS

I Building Symposia Gängeviertel - Cooperation Procedure and Renovation (2016): The *Building Symposia* in Hamburg's historic Gängeviertel aimed to include activists from the Gängeviertel, authorities, urban planners and an interested public in order to create a framework for discussions about technical and planning questions regarding the renovation of the site. The fourth building symposium was devoted to the cooperation procedure between the Gängeviertel activists and the municipality. For the *Workshop for Common Futures* the invited participants were expected to share their goals and to identify similarities. The workshop was moderated by Christoph Hinske of the Institute for Strategic Clarity. The subsequent public part linked the workshop to current discourses around civic protests and participation in urban planning as well as new forms of cooperation between citizens and city administrations. Michael Ziehl, *Building Symposia Gängeviertel – Cooperation Procedure and Renovation*, 2016, Hamburg

II groove space series (2014-16): The performance series */groove space* was an artistic experiment in various cities. The organisational principles of club dance identified in Matthias' research on groove were transferred into the performing arts context as choreographic structures and helped to artistically investigate urban spaces. The groove spaces applied the observed dynamics of the club as a choreographic means. Hence, *groove space* investigated how audience movements could also induce movements of the performers and test if a groove dynamic could be created outside of the club context. Sebastian Matthias, *groove space series*, 2014-16, Berlin/Zurich/Freiburg/Jakarta/Düsseldorf/Tokyo

WHAT IS RESEARCHED?

Interventions into the Real can include research on all questions⁴ of everyday life and of contemporary forms of living together. Generally, growing insights from the humanities⁵ into the performativity of the everyday build an important basis to understand, develop and set up performative interventions as research. Though related to knowledge and theory from ethnography, sociology,

feelings, etcetera. Many outcomes can be verbalised or visualised, but some manifest in a way that eludes the discursive grasp. Knowledge production within PABR means that explicit and implicit forms of knowledge are valued equally. The researchers try to choose forms of presentation and analysis that make these forms recognisable. It has to be made clear that this analysis is one of many possible research narratives. Besides, there might be diverse research narratives that can be known and recognised, but also some that remain unknown to the researcher. PABR is distributed knowledge.

4 Research question: General research questions frame the direction of research and unite the heterogeneous participants with their different agendas. Deriving from a given practice, need, problem or interest, the field and subject matter are defined. After mapping out the current state of research, as well as identifying factors and actors relevant to the given context, an appropriate research format can be chosen to approach the research question.

5 Humanities: In the humanities, knowledge about the performativity of the everyday, the institutional, the social, the urban, the political, etcetera, is expanding. Combined with performative art practices, this knowledge can be used to build hypotheses for experimental interventions and further practical exploration. The agenda of this kind of experimentation is often twofold: On the one hand, knowledge from the humanities is tested in different fields. Thereby, it is questioned and augmented from the perspective of cultural practice. On the other hand, practice triggers questions about how the knowledge produced by the humanities can actually be used for transformative change.

psychology, performance studies and other disciplines, this research format⁶ is in radical conflict with older scientific concepts of research, where research is expected to take the form of an observation or reading that is not interfering with its object. *Intervention into the Real*, in contrast, research transformation and change – precisely by being a part of these processes. Hence, *Interventions into the Real* as a format intentionally combines academic knowledge and interventionist art with other forms of knowledge crucial for the everyday⁷: practical or strategic, problem-driven (*Yes No Maybe 2013*^{III}), but also tacit or bodily knowledge. The research set-up treats these different forms of knowledge as equal and therefore creates outcomes on different levels.

Interventions into the Real often take a social phenomenon as a starting point for defining a possible research question or practical knowledge gap. Contemporary key challenges can often be identified in a condensed version in the practical engagement with specific local problems (Schneidewind/Singer-Brodowski 2015: 12). The social phenomenon contains stable, ongoing or repeating activities in which the performative set-up can be tested. The format also aims at exceptional local situations that present a specific challenge that needs solving.

III Yes No Maybe (2013): The open areas of the Gängeviertel, a self-organized housing and culture project in Hamburg, were supposed to be developed and Kowalski intervened into the planning process with ideas of school children (8-9 years old) for making the public places more attractive for children. The children's suggestions were presented to the various actors of that development process – activists from the Gängeviertel project, the architects and city planners in charge – and voted upon in the *Yes No Maybe* assembly. For the voting procedure, Kowalski, together with five artists and a school class, developed five different decision-making procedures to vote on the different designs.

Hannah Kowalski, *Yes No Maybe*, 2013, Hamburg

As the research question often relates to a distinct challenge, the format requires precise inside knowledge of the practice, which can only be obtained by being an active part in the researched field. This enables the researcher⁸ to connect to other actors and to initiate a participatory research process. As

6 Research formats: A single research format is realised in a specific context to configure the collaborative research of different experts in a physical way. It can structure one complete research project or become a smaller element within another format. The process starts with a desire, need, or question that brings together the participants as co-researchers, creating a collective agenda and interest in the research process. This collective interest has to be established before the participating researchers are able to perform, test materials, act, or assemble collaboratively. The co-researchers should be able to arrange, rehearse and plan details and activities for performative events. The activities and events then need to be evaluated or compared in relation to the underlying needs, questions and desires. Only after this evaluation can it be decided whether the same process should be repeated, whether the rules and conditions should be adjusted or modified, whether the format should be changed entirely or whether researchers should proceed to another application/publication.

7 Everyday knowledge: PABR values knowledge stemming from everyday practices and life experience as equal to academic or artistic kinds of knowledge. The PhD programmes have initially been founded in response to new ways of assembling and participating created by activists of the Real Democracy movements of 2011. Subsequently, many of the research projects tried to enter into a dialogue with activists and other experts of the everyday, while art-based tools helped to access, acknowledge and translate their expertise.

8 Researchers/co-researchers/participants: Researchers within PABR are those who are involved in the whole research process from beginning to end and are responsible for the shape and progression of the process. Co-researchers are invited to collaborate and join the research process for shorter or longer periods of time. Participants are invited to join the research only at certain points, for instance during its public pre-



a research format, *Intervention into the Real* produces knowledge of the local system, including knowledge of performative protocols in their spatial, temporal and bodily dimensions, knowledge of power relations, of the competences of local actors, of the distribution and usage of resources, as well as of legal/political frameworks. It also produces knowledge of subject positions, of goals and orientations, needs, desires and wishes of actors. Furthermore, transformation knowledge combines an understanding of the possibility and reasons for the success/failure of the intervention and its transferability into different contexts. Transformation knowledge connects with motivations, personal histories and values. (Ziehl 2020, Schneidewind/Singer-Brodowski 2015: 12) Hence, there are different degrees of engagement in an *Intervention into the Real*: The researchers lead the intervention, the co-researchers are actors explicitly taking part in the intervention and finding a solution for the given challenge, and the participants are either actors in the field who do not engage explicitly in the participatory research, but live and act inside the context, or who come to the intervention as an audience and as witnesses.

IV Laboratory Report (2017): Since Hamburg's historic Gängeviertel was occupied by activists and artists in 2009, the City of Hamburg and the Gängeviertel Initiative have been working together to develop the neighbourhood as a lively district with affordable rents for living and for socio-cultural uses. As part of his research, Ziehl examined how city administrations and citizens' initiatives can work together to develop cities for the future. He actively participated in the cooperation process including the publication of an artistic-scientific *Laboratory Report* in the form of a brochure. The *Laboratory Report* was conceptualised as a boundary object in the sense of a shared reference for the cooperation partners. Ziehl's aim was to invite the cooperation partners to reflect upon their behaviour in the cooperation process and thus to encourage them to overcome the deadlock in the cooperation.

Michael Ziehl, *Future Viability through Cooperation: The Renovation of the Gängeviertel/Laboratory Report*, 2017, Hamburg

ARTISTIC MEANS

As dramaturgies and stagings of situations are the prime expertise of the performing arts, they provide the required knowledge for setting up events that intervene into the everyday.

As a research format, *Interventions into the Real* will enter into a dialogue with a given field instead of replacing it with a spectacle. Only in the interaction with the field in question will the research set-up provide insights into the performativity of the field, as well as into alternative solutions and strategies for the field.

Based on lived experience of the co-researchers, the artistic event is implemented in relation to problems, conditions or practices imbedded in the specific social space. Thorough pre-analysis is the basis for a prognosis on rules, behaviour, practical problems that need solving, etcetera, on which the planning of the intervention can be based. Often, interventions are designed or devised by modulating observed rules, ways of working or choreographies to be found in the field. Objects or ideas (*Laboratory Report 2017^{IV}*) can be inserted into the social process. Situations can be relocated, restaged and actors or other practices can be added to the process in question. These interventions often rely on art discourse and artistic composing techniques such as choreography and their respective aesthetics. However, surprise is an important characteristic of this format as interactions within emergent processes always include factors with unforeseeable outcomes (Groß et al. 2005: 12). Acts of modulation, refiguration, and transla-

sentation, and are involved in different ways. In order to organise participation on equal terms, it is crucial to recognise and acknowledge the different questions, interests, responsibilities, capacities and availabilities of the different co-researchers and participants and to define their role within the process.

tion need to be conducted from the discursive, but also from the actual physical perspective to develop the artistic intervention further. As in a rehearsal⁹ process, trying out things is the most effective way to proceed. At the same time, the intervention creates analytical distance and self-reflection with regard to standardised processes. As in a rehearsal process, observation and intervention, action and reflection have to be brought into a feedback loop to move the research forward. Documentation¹⁰ has to be interwoven into this process and should itself be process-based. Generally, the use of artistic interventions enables discussion and imagination of what is possible; it interacts with the collective imaginary.

POTENTIALS, PROBLEMS AND OUTCOMES

The use of artistic composition tools provides a useful and unexpected range of instruments for a critical engagement with a situation. Artistic tools are designed to develop and produce events that have the potential to come up with surprising suggestions for transforming a given situation.

Social processes are investigated and transformed, tested beyond language, through corporal interaction with local dynamics. The artistic interventions or performative acts can be performed in everyday situations or as an event that is specifically staged and framed as an experiment. If the intervention is executed as a special event, it has to be prepared carefully as there is only one chance to get results. In particular, the engagement of the (local) participants as well as the methods of documenting the event are crucial components in capturing the results of the intervention. If participatory research is framed as such, the format can initiate a learning and empowerment¹¹ process for all participants. However, each member, especially when taking an activist position, will have certain interests and expectations regarding

9 Rehearsal: In the performative arts, rehearsing can be understood as an act of practicing, for example learning specific skills or practicing to play a specific role, and running through different possibilities of solving an artistic task. Beyond that, the rehearsal is also understood as a moment of testing. In its frame of (pre-)presenting and watching, one always forecasts the audience's view and reaction. Rehearsal and performance can fall into one, if, for instance, a test version of a specific form of assembling or a certain form of acting is publicly presented. In both perspectives, the rehearsal can be understood as a procedure to acquire knowledge. Rehearsing is an artistic practice that is characterised by collectivity, performativity and different uses of media (Plischke 2018, Matzke 2012).

10 Documentation: How processes of PABR are documented depends on each project and cannot be determined in a general way. Researchers are advised to put documentation measures in place that help to store and translate processes and outcomes for those contexts in which she wants the project to proliferate. Documentation should be intertwined with moments of presentation and of gathering research material. Each project should develop a documentation method appropriate to the project, which may consist of several forms of documentation. Performances can be documented by video recordings, whereas collections, archives and media artefacts may become their own documentation. However, the collective activities are fleeting and perceived differently by each participant. The same event can be evaluated differently from the outside than from the perspectives of the performing participants. For comparison and evaluation purposes, these different experiences need to be represented in some form: collective writing, questionnaires, drawings, transcriptions of discussions or interviews, formal responses, and so on.

11 Empowerment: Participatory settings and strategies can empower people. Actors in education, social work, politics, and the arts aim to enlarge the autonomy and self-determination of individuals and communities, citizens and non-citizens. The concept is criticized for an underlying diagnosis of deficiencies, which is answered by an accentuation of potentials. Empowering qualities are ascribed to the arts in particular. However, the arts should not be forced into a context of promising or guaranteeing empowerment within structures of increasing powerlessness (Gunsilius 2019).

the challenges in question. This proximity of the participants to the research subject has been problematised by traditional research institutions (Strohschneider 2014).

A single intervention might be sufficient for testing a hypothesis, but a series of interventions might strengthen the argument, create more awareness and impulses in the field. Of course, results will change as soon as actors in the field adjust and get used to the intervention.

If the intervention is embedded in an everyday situation it needs to be integrated into quotidian processes to enter into a dialogue with them. The intervention needs to be clearly performed and carried out as planned to ensure comparable results. Therefore, the researcher needs to inform co-researchers such as performers and make them aware of their role and their required performance. Under certain conditions, the interventions have to be short-lived so the space is not turned into an art space. If the local visitors approach the action as they would an art space, their reaction and behaviour will resemble that of an audience, and local participants might shift from the position of active participants into that of passive observers (especially in public space). Participants then might want to meet the expectations of artists/researchers and established rules might be suspended not as a transformation of the everyday but in response to a perceived artistic intention.

Generally, *Interventions into the Real* tend to produce a critical awareness of the distinct line between art and reality, which can be crossed and re-established several times. This can sometimes become a cause for conflict – especially when an intervention was successful but its actual implementation into reality fails (because it is politically or financially not possible). In cases like this, the artistic proposal might create disappointment and produce an alienation with the social

process. This may influence ongoing processes in that social space and can have negative consequences for some actors. The Intervention into the Real is placed in real world situations and does not create a protected space. Researchers need to handle the modulations and interactions with care. There might be severe real-life consequences for people if the intervention is not done respectfully and with caution.

ENDNOTES

a Further references can be found in Weingart/Carrier/Krohn 2007, Ziemer/Reimers 2014, de Certeau 1984, or in the Charta for Advanced Practices that was launched by the European Forum for Advanced Practices (EFAP 2019).

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