**THE SENTIENT CITY**

SoSe 2019 – Bachelor, Europäische Ethnologie  
Veranstaltungsnr.: 51705 | 2SWS - 4ECTS  
Wednesdays 12:00-14:00 – Seminar room: IfEE, R.312 – Møhrenstraße 40/41

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Sprechstunden (prior appointment by email): Mondays 10-12  
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**DESCRIPTION**

This course offers conceptual and methodological training for students to become multisensory-aware urban anthropologists. Through reading and hands-on workshops–combining anthropological debates on the senses, sensoriality, and sensing with a series of experiential walks and other types of engagements—, we will search to understand *how a city feels*. The course, then, wishes to immerse students in an exploration of what role our embodied senses play in order to be able to live in and thrive on its streets, squares, and parks.

For this, students will become sensitized to the understanding that a sensible approach for any urban anthropologist needs to start from expanding the reach of what the sensory means, in order to capture the complex environments that our cities constitute. Hence learning to recognize the variegated human and more-than-human inhabitants that make of our cities much more complex sentient ecologies: not only providing interesting interfaces to feel ‘differently’ – if only we paid close attention! –, but also transforming and re-mediating how we feel, interfering with the conventional understandings of our everyday worlds. In changing our approach for a multisensory one, then, we get a different feel of the cities we inhabit, realizing that they are far less common urban worlds than we might have originally thought.

Thus, our training and explorations will not only search to foreground our own experiential engagement as ethnographers of the urban, but will search to unfold methods to approach the not-so-easy to describe, and sometimes unfathomable sentient worlds of a wide variety of human and animal bodies we live with, as well as to understand our relations with not-so-inert urban materials (the city’s material components, as well as gases or pollution, or responsive digital sensors). Learning to understand, in a nutshell, how city’s also *feel* in a wide variety of ways. Drawing inspiration from a series of artistic and activist explorations into the sensory awareness of cities, the main outcome of the course would be to collaboratively produce a toolkit for the urban appreciation of the sentient city in all its vastness, helping to equip others to venture into the many complexities of urban sensing practices.

**REQUIREMENTS TO PASS THE COURSE**

a) *Class presentations & participation in the online documentation*

Tentative method (to be defined depending on the number of attending students):

1. In Block 1:
   
   a. One person/group is in charge of presenting the reading: The person/group presenting will have to decide (perhaps discussing this with the rest of the group) the main reading that will be discussed by the whole group, also reading in preparation the second one, and giving insights in the session for the ones who haven’t read it.
   
   b. Before that, every person wishing to pass the course should submit a quotation from the chosen text s/he would like to discuss with the rest, together with a 2-3 lines explanation.

   c. One person/group per session would be in charge of documenting the debates in any kind of textual or graphic form (following the
experiments discussed by Mauksch, 2018a, 2018b, see below), and send this through the Moodle, so that a collective documentation of the process could be compiled.


2. In Block 2:
   a. A similar procedure to the one of Block 1 will apply to the sessions involving ‘conceptual considerations’.
      i. A presenting group will take care of doing a public presentation at the beginning of the session (of no more than 30’), then creating the conditions for a conversation in break-out groups
      ii. Break-out groups will debate on the readings in 30’, appointing a spokesperson who will report to the class
      iii. We will close with another 30’ of a final open discussion
   b. For the ‘hands-on reflections’: All should read the text in advance of the session, but the quotation should be sent after the session, connecting it with the main learning from the experiential engagement.

b) Non-compulsory further reading (in case you would want to learn more): The following books from the Semesterapparat (search for the whole bibliography of the course at the Grimm-Zentrum)

   i. Howes Sensual relations
   ii. Ingold Being alive
   iii. Serres The five senses
   iv. Bates, Imrie & Kullman Care and Design: Bodies, buildings, cities
   v. Kirksey Emergent ecologies
   vi. Despret What would animals say if we asked the right questions?
   vii. Murphy Sick building syndrome and the problem of uncertainty
   viii. McCormack Atmospheric Things

PROGRAMME

10.4 Presentation: Towards an anthropology of urban sensing practices

Block 1 – A PEDAGOGY OF THE LIMIT?
SENSING THE CITY BEYOND PHENOMENOLOGY

17.4 Anthropological work on sensing

   * Readings
   - Anthropology of the senses vs. sensory anthropology debate:
24.4 Learning to relate: Re-addressing sensing below and beyond the body of the anthropologist

* Readings

8.5 Learning to relate in order to relate: Re-tooling anthropological forms of sensory accounting

* Readings
  - Mattern, S. (2013). Infrastructural Tourism: From the Interstate to the Internet. *Places*

Block 2 – RE-TOOLING SENSING:
COMPLEX URBAN SENTIENT LANDSCAPES

In order to explore beyond the boundaries of phenomenological understandings of the body and sensing, and in order to learn as urban anthropologists to re-appreciate the city as a complex sentient landscape, we will undertake an exploration in four blocks. In them we will attempt to situate at the limits: disputing, challenging or putting at risk our clear-cut and immediate understandings of the senses, going beyond and below the body of the anthropologist as the main resource of our own understanding of sensing. The four blocks will be the following:

1. Multispecies urban encounters
2. The city of disensual bodies
3. How to feel an urban atmosphere?
4. Getting a feel of urban materials

Each block has two sessions each. The first sessions (*conceptual considerations*) will be devoted to reading together. The second ones (*hands-on reflections*), for which we will also read in advance, will devote to an appreciation of these issues guided by an exploratory question (a more detailed description of the task at hand will be
provided at a later stage). As a result, we will attempt to re-tool ourselves to develop some literacy on more-than-human forms of urban sensing.

15.5 Multispecies urban encounters I: Conceptual considerations

* Readings

22.5 Multispecies urban encounters II: Hands-on reflections

Exploratory question: *Where do other species (plants and animals) live or thrive in Hausvogteiplatz? How could we get ‘closer’ to them?*

INSTRUCTIONS

For this session we will search to learn from [Marcus Coates’s *Dawn Chorus*](http://example.com) as an artistic exploration and as mode of relating to regular urban companions that we tend to pay little attention to: birds. For this, in couples or small groups, you will do the following:

12:15–12:45 I Locate a bird in the square, and to stay as close as you possibly can without making it go away:
- if it moves, move with it, follow it if it remains in the square;
- if it sings, pay attention, and try to learn the tune;
- if you lose it, find another one;
- try to appreciate it the places and the sites in which it moves around, with whom it interacts;
- keep a field record of all this in a collective notebook.

12:45–13:00 I In the following 15’ your task will be to (i) draw a cartography / map of the milieu of the bird, its movements and relations; with your cellphone (ii) record a good-enough sound file of the bird, and if you have the chance (iii) film a short video.

13:00–13:30 I We will go back to the class, and we explore how, in order to remain close to the bird's singing, we might need to use a sound editor, and we will try to experiment singing the slowed-down sound file, then speeding it up.

13:30–13:45 & homework I Discuss in your group
- What do these mediated practices make available of our relation to birds, and what do they obscure/render less articulate?
- At home, do a small search online: Try to locate the species of the bird you followed, and search for their behaviour, and how do biologists, ornithologists and ethologists know birds. Now, go again: What other things might you have done, now that you know this?
- What do you think we might learn as anthropologists from artistic explorations such as Marcus Coates's or from the work of natural scientists?

* Further preparation

29.5 [LECTURER NOT PRESENT] **The city of dissensual bodies I**: Conceptual considerations

* Readings

5.6 **The city of dissensual bodies II**: Hands-on reflections

Exploratory question: *How would a blind person walk through Hausvogteiplatz?*

**INSTRUCTIONS**

Today we will try out an adaptation of a ‘blindfold game’ through which we will not only search to experience the square otherwise, but also where you will learn how through synaesthetic exercises you might experience the issues and problems of having to translate space in different sensory modes. So, the proposal is the following:

1. Form couples.
2. You have 30’ to do the following exercise:
   a. Use your pullover, a handkerchief or whatever might be handy to blindfold one of you. The seeing person should choose a starting point and a point of arrival (not too far away).
   b. The blindfolded person should turn around 3 times. And then, with the help of the seeing partner, both should move to the chosen starting point.
   c. Without bodily contact the seeing member should guide the other to move to the chosen spot.
   d. The blindfolded one also has another task: searching to use his or her senses to understand how he or she could learn the route, finding hints and traces along the way. This should be done in whatever way possible: not walking but crawling, smelling the floor, feeling the different composition of the materials, etc.
   e. Repeat the route as many times as necessary.
3. Repeat the exercise swapping places for another 30’.
4. Small discussion
5. Homework: In couples, and playing with the aesthetics of your choosing (treasure maps, fictional or imaginary maps, etc.), draw a how-to guide describing someone who was not there today the exploration of space we did today. This depiction not
only should contain instructions on the appropriate way to do it, but the sensory landscape of your explorations.

Inspiration: Terra Forma (in French) | This is not an Atlas

* Further preparation

12.6 How does an urban atmosphere ‘feel’? I: Conceptual considerations

* Readings

19.6 How does an urban atmosphere ‘feel’? II: Hands-on reflections

Exploratory question: How and with what techniques/devices can we feel Hausvogteiplatz’s aerial atmospheres?

Invited guest: Nick Shapiro, UCLA

INSTRUCTIONS
Many of the things that we now appear to care the most—environmental pollution, the climate crisis, etc.—entail complex to directly access them, except in particularly brutal moments or conditions. Our very bodies, and also with the kind of linguistic or text-related means of inscription and description that we have tended to mobilise in anthropology and ethnographic work might need a gentle push or a slight add-on so as to be able to participate in those conversations with our knowledge.

In the last century, different kinds of actors (mostly scientists) have tried to craft knowledge about these conditions, and have invented for this attempt many kinds of gadgets to render themselves sensible to the problem, articulating it, and creating conceptual repertoires to debate that. Gathering facts is, indeed, in many locales a relevant activity to bring conditions of change, or at least to attempt to do so. And in different places, in moments of post-truth, the very factness of facts is becoming disputed.

Data about pollution is also an omnipresent atmospheric condition of the present, and different activists search to give access to different measuring devices so as to politicise the divergent conditions of the environmental dangers we live by. However, facts in the guise of numbers also come with their own problems: In late-capitalist societies we are indeed living in polluted environments because of the omnipresence of cars, factories, and our very means of livelihood; many times the conversations there emerging, with variegated actors around the degrees and thresholds of the kind of exposure we deem acceptable or not, create silos of conversations around the politics of evidence that might slow down any kind of rapid reactions we might want
to take against this. If we want to diminish NO2 concentrations, how many cars should we accept in a city’s city centre?

What if in order to be able to speak about these atmospheric conditions, talk about them, become a public concerned about what they imply we also needed to learn from other situations and practices. For instance, from artists who beyond gathering facts also try to create other entry-points into our aerial conditions, like Tomás Sarraceno in his many works with balloons in the project called *Aerocene*. Perhaps, inspired by them, we might need to invent practices, devices or situations to apprehend and learn to think our aerial atmospheric conditions, so as to have other kinds of conversations and to take action in other ways about the polluted environments we inhabit.

In this particular session, accompanied by Nick Shapiro, we’d like to test the small power of balloons to evince the complex dynamics of polluted atmospheres that we many times cannot access through our bodily practices. And, yes, we are aware that each gadget opens up as much as it closes down, makes present as much as it makes absent: But what do these small and humble devices allow us to sense, or what kinds of knowledges concerning aerial atmospheric conditions they help to elicit?

1. We will start with a simple activity: In couples, one of the members of the couple should blow a balloon.
2. Then, without properly closing the balloon, pass it on to the other person, and inhale it? Or, well, oops, maybe not?
3. Discuss in the couple for the next couple of minutes: why inhaling or not? How do we know what’s in the air? Who told you what’s in the air to want to do that or not? What does your reaction tell us about the nature of pollution?
4. We will meet again in a round group to discuss publicly on what just happened
5. Keeping the balloon closed, we will move into the class again. And we will let the air of the balloon flow into the room: What now? Are you inhaling the same you would have inhaled if intaking the air directly from the balloon?
6. We will close the session with a conversation on what we know about the distinction between the commonly fetishized concern around outdoor environmental pollution, and the lack around the most polluted environments we inhabit, where as Nick usually reminds us, we tend to spend more than 90% of our time in: indoor spaces.

Inspiration: Sarraceno’s [Aerocene] *Public Lat*

* Further preparation

26.6 Getting a feel of urban materials I: Conceptual considerations
3.7 Getting a feel of urban materials II: Hands-on reflections

Exploratory question: *How to understand the materials is Hausvogteiplatz and their trajectories?*

**INSTRUCTIONS**
In this session we will experiment a bit in trying to understand how to reason and discuss urban materials. For this we will experiment a bit in trying to build an experiential archive of the materials of a particular place or, rather, of a particular atmospheric time-space. For this, we will draw inspiration from the artistic urban research of Mirja Busch and her work in building a [Pfützenarchiv](#) (an archive of puddles).

We will go to the park close to Hausvogteiplatz, and in couples, you have to do the following:

a. For 5’ explore the park, paying attention to its materials: But after reading Ingold, what’s a material, huh? Discuss as you walk.

b. After this initial exploration, for another 5’ consider what it might mean to document or archive one particular material of this park so as to be able to show or make palpable either (1) what parks are or (2) what this park is in particular to someone who has never seen one.

c. For yet another 5’ consider how you might collect or archive that material, and after you have a sound idea take a sample, extract a recollection, take a picture, or develop any other form to document it.

Once you have it, we’ll meet collectively, and we will do the following:

d. In around 15-20’ all couples have to debate with the rest to collectively assemble an archive of materials from the park.

e. We will devote the rest of the session to a discussion of what different recollections allow, the stories that might be derived from them and what might be missing from our archival attempt to narrate the park and its atmosphere(s).

* Further preparation

10.7 [OPTIONAL, DIGITAL PARTICIPATION] **Student brainstorm:** Collectively imagining a sentient city toolkit for other colleagues to learn from your explorations.

Exploratory questions: *What have we learnt and how could we make others aware? How would a toolkit for this kind of anthropological exploration look like?*

**MOSTLY RELEVANT IF THINKING OF DOING THE MAP IN THIS COURSE.**
SEND YOUR IMPRESSIONS OR THOUGHTS

* Further reading (if interested)
- Los Angeles Urban Rangers: [website](#)
- The Observation Deck: [website](#)
- The Smell Memory Starter Kit: [website](#)