

Public Poetry. Lyrik im urbanen Raum [Lyric in Urban Space]

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“Public Poetry. Lyrik im urbanen Raum” [Public Poetry. Lyric in Urban Space] is an interdisciplinary research project that brings together approaches from literary studies and urban sociology and which will result in the publication of a book. It is dedicated to the visual and auditory presence of poetry in urban settings. Visual examples include “poetry in motion”: framed and ornamental poems found in the subway cars of various metropolises; or large-scale poetry on façades, be it only temporary – e.g., fluid light projections within the framed space of art events – or permanent, like a mural or inscription with gigantic verse on the side of a house. “Billboard poetry” or neon light installations in parks and on public squares may be mentioned as well. Auditory forms, though different, are no less relevant: from technically enhanced spoken word events, audible within the urban space, to poetic interventions, such as the declamation of poems at symbolic sites through a megaphone or “poem rain” dropped from the sky by a helicopter. The project investigates both officially endorsed poetry projects that have been approved by the city council and informal activities initiated by poets or urban inhabitants themselves, who thus claim their “right to the city” (Henri Lefebvre).

By asking how and why the language being used is perceived as ‘poetic’ – contrary, for instance, to advertisements, signs, or graffiti – we are not only questioning the aesthetics of these different graphic-artistic or performative-auditory works. Public poetry is also investigated from the perspective of urban sociology by looking at the production of space through poetry at concrete sites. The project’s theoretical background thus relies on approaches from poetics, art theory, and interdisciplinary theories of space; its empirical approaches include on-site exploration and interviews with passers-by, locals, poets, and initiators.

The research project is based on the premise that the urban sphere can no longer be adequately described by the dichotomy of private and public spaces. Through processes of privatization, commercialization, and surveillance, new types of space have opened up that no longer fulfill these criteria: for instance, shopping centers, business improvement districts, and transit spaces, which Marc Augé has described as “non-spaces,” lacking in history and identity. One of the basic assumptions of the project is that the presence of poetry, often presenting itself as a ‘subjective’ mode of address reflects this change. The study therefore asks how poetry is perceived in urban spaces: whether it acts as an irritant to our internalized behavioral routines in order to put them in question and whether it is simply assimilated into existing trends of spatial development or motivates new, critical perspectives.