

Discovering Oral History as a research tool – Reflection on an internship

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Have you ever experienced the peculiar sensation of passing by something day after day, its presence almost invisible amidst the familiar backdrop of your daily routine? You know it is there, of course, but its significance eludes you as it blends seamlessly alongside your surroundings. Then, one day, something shifts.

Perhaps it is a chance encounter with someone who shares a story, shedding light on the otherwise enigmatic object. Or maybe an opportunity arises to pause and observe previously unnoticed details on your daily commute to work or school. But irrespective of the method, what matters the most is becoming aware of the relationship between the built environment and human emotions, perceptions, and behaviours – at least according to scholars of psychogeography.

In short, this is a theoretical framework that investigates the psychological impact of urban landscapes on individuals by emphasizing their interconnectedness – or, in other words, how they both generate and sustain each other.

It encourages a more holistic understanding of one's surroundings by highlighting the personal and the relational, which is how I, too, had approached (and will now present my findings regarding) the following research question: "What are the psychogeographical implications of integrating Shlomo Koren's 'Tension Pieces' within Amsterdam South-East?"

This art installation, placed right outside of Holendrecht metro station, is one personal example that aligns with the anecdotal question from the beginning; I must have walked past it countless of times in the past three years on my way to and from exams held at the UvA examination center that is right around the corner, but I only learned its significance once I started my internship at the Amsterdam Time Machine in November 2023.

That is when I met Janna and Boudewijn for the very first time to discuss my proposal of joining their team for a brief period in early 2024, so the last thing I expected was to already walk out of that meeting with a semi-structured topic for an individual research project.

CHRONOLOGY

I remember briefly mentioning the concept of 'psychogeography' since this was a framework I had just been introduced to in a course called "Urban Anthropology Lab" and wanted to know more about. This turned out to be of great interest to one of my supervisors since she had been collaborating on an Encyclopedia by local residents about places in Amsterdam South-East without knowing that there exists a concept which encompasses precisely the relationship between people and their surrounding (and/or lived-in) environment.

On the one hand, this interaction was the first of many throughout this internship that have allowed me to see the theoretical so clearly reflected in the practical through real-world examples from my supervisors' personal projects and ethnographic work.

On the other hand, this discussion broadened my horizons regarding what it means to be part of collaborative work environments within academia, since my brief suggestion ended up being workshopped on the spot by the three of us – we brainstormed for a few minutes and came up with a list of ‘psychogeography’-related topics that could yield original results about Amsterdam South-East and we concluded our first meeting with the agreement that I would read up on those possible directions, so that I could then choose one for my individual research project.

The following steps in my internship journey resembled those I would have to take in any of my university courses: I pitched an idea to my supervisors and adjusted it according to their feedback, I drafted a more detailed plan of action and a research proposal in accordance with the new adjustments, I conducted a systematic literature review before starting the interviewing process for collecting empirical data, I organized the material I had obtained from my interviewees into themes and drafted the structure of the argument for the final blogpost.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES and CHALLENGES

However, the experience of working on this project was unlike any of my previous encounters with individual research, since I was accustomed to having one professor supervising around 25 students sometimes writing about very different topics, which often resulted in each student receiving less individualized guidance and/or feedback.

Therefore, this internship has been an invaluable learning experience for me – I still had enough individual freedom to choose my own research topic and outline a preliminary research design, but the small-scale and collaborative nature of the research team allowed me to get more in-depth feedback. Additionally, I was guided on how to adjust my project and the expectations I had for it accordingly, without having to always put myself in the vulnerable position of asking for help.

In other words, this internship provided both the opportunity to reflect on the strategies I have been using so far (and to take small steps towards changing what no longer works about those practices), as well as a comfortable environment in which to test research methodologies that were completely unfamiliar to me prior to this (such as, for instance, the ‘oral history’ interviewing method or communicating research findings in the form of a blogpost).

Furthermore, I got to compare different research methodologies by hearing about how they had been used by other people and by using them myself under various circumstances; more specifically, I conducted an ‘oral history’ interview in the closed space of a café in Amsterdam South-East, a semi-structured walking interview around “Tension Pieces,” and then allowed my last interviewee to plan the route of a mixed-method walking interview along their favorite public art installations around their house in Amsterdam South-East.

Undergoing this diverse range of interviewing experiences taught me the extent to which the chosen environment or the different levels of previously established rapport between interviewer and interviewee can shape a conversation. Additionally, it demonstrated the importance of keeping an open mind throughout the research process and of constantly

adapting my approach to various circumstances (such as, for instance, my interviewees' characters and communication styles).

As mentioned above, adjustments had to be made all throughout the research process to overcome the challenges that never stopped arising. For instance, one of the first yet most challenging issues had been to narrow down my interests to a manageable research project – my first proposal was very broad and could have easily been divided into three different projects. After discussing it with my supervisors, we managed to refine the scope of the project into something that could be studied through the lens of only one research question (“What are the psychogeographical implications of integrating art installations within the public transportation infrastructure of Amsterdam South-East?”).

CONTEXTUALIZING “TENSION PIECES”

Since I devoted the initial sections to describing my experience as a research intern at the Amsterdam Time Machine, I will dedicate the latter part of this blogpost to discussing the actual findings of my individual research project. I will start with contextualizing the artwork in question, Shlomo Koren's “Tension Pieces” by examining its impact on the surrounding environment. I shall do so by discussing both the artist's intentions for it and the residents' reactions to it. My approach should, therefore, be understood as a psychogeography-based analysis of one case study within the broader context of integrating public art in urban spaces, especially the complexities of public art's role in shaping perceptions of place and belonging.

What inspired me to explore these two dimensions in particular was the artist's life story, as Shlomo Koren's family first immigrated from Germany to the British Mandate of Palestine, then to the Netherlands. These were formative experiences for himself as a person and as an artist, which he clearly illustrated through the following statement: “Sometimes I wonder if I did the right thing moving. Although I have lived here for more than forty years, my roots are in Israel. I am not in my original place; I don't feel Dutch. (...) Whether you move a building or a person, it always leaves traces.” It now becomes evident why he proclaimed the theme of ‘detachment’ the central metaphor of his abstract and often minimalist work, of which “Tension Pieces” is but one practical application. Essentially, this two-part art installation depicts the extent to which the environment can exert tension on a material and, in a more metaphorical sense, on a person: on one side of the artwork, the curvature of the six metal plates gradually increases as they are connected to the wall in two places, while on the other side, the plates are only connected to the wall in one place and can, therefore, spring freely away from it (also in a gradually increasing manner).

During my interviews, it rarely happened that people's opinions about the “Tension Pieces” aligned with the artistic vision explained above. Most people, irrespective of being just a passer-by, a regular commuter or a permanent resident could not accurately explain, or at very least guess, the meaning behind this artwork; some did not even realize it was art to begin with:

“To be honest, I always thought it was meant to somehow support the metro station, you know? Because it is right between these two walls. But now that I think of it, it doesn't really make sense because it looks kinda old and rusty. I don't know, I never paid much attention to it really... before now.”

The confusion did not dissipate after I had informed my interviewee (a student who, just like me on many occasions, was only focused on getting home as soon as possible after an exam at the UvA centre nearby) that this actually was an art installation: “I still don’t have much to go off of here. I’ve already said it’s quite rusty, but I am now thinking whether it was meant to be like this or if it’s just not been maintained well. I don’t know what else to say, really. I suppose the bent is intentional, so I’ll guess it has something to do with physics. You know, to show the elasticity of metal. Maybe it has something to do with chemistry as well, like maybe they let it rust on purpose to show how the material can change over time.”

I talked to a few more students during that same, rather spontaneous interviewing session – I already knew that an exam was happening that evening, so I thought it would be interesting to just ask a few passers-by what they thought of this piece; nonetheless, their answers were equally distant from the ‘truth’ as the ones presented above: “Does it have anything to do with architecture? Like is it referencing a building of some sort? Because if you think of the Tower of Pisa and how everybody is always shocked that it can still stand even though it is leaning to one side, I’m sure there’s one abstract work of art that symbolizes it even though it’s not that obvious. Maybe it’s the same here, with these curved parts. Or maybe I’m just projecting my obsession with architecture on this piece, I don’t know.”

What I did not realize while conducting these short interviews was the extent to which I was already gathering valuable insights about how art works in the public space and how regular people – meaning, people who are not trained in and/or have a particular inclination towards art – engage with it on a daily basis (i.e., Do they notice it, or do they just pass by it? Does it stand out, or does it blend with its surroundings?) Looking back, I would attribute my ‘unawareness’ to the fact that these conversations happened quite early in the research process, when my senses were not yet attuned to recognizing what might be useful for my research. Coincidentally, this activity was meant to do just that and be a fun way for me to engage with the artwork and immerse myself in this new project differently than before.

METHODOLOGY

So, while I continued to read articles on topics similar to my initial idea, I also tried to minimize my reliance on existing literature and instead adopted a more hands-on approach; in short, I allowed the empirical data to guide me towards a final topic rather than starting from an ideal plan and trying to make the data fit within its robust boundaries.

What tremendously helped me progress towards this goal was employing the ‘oral history’ interviewing method, which essentially affords interviewees the opportunity to lead conversations through stories about their lived experiences. Nonetheless, familiarizing myself with this methodology has truly been a process. For example, I knew that the interviewees should do most of the talking, but I still prepared a personalized interview guide for each of my interviewees before meeting with my supervisors so that we could workshop them together before the actual interviews.

Regarding this, my supervisors explained that I should not approach an ‘oral history’ interview with the same amount of expectations as I would a semi-structured interview – or in other words, I should not make it my goal to only get answers for specific questions that

interest me – but rather become comfortable with the fact that I can only control the starting point of the interview and that the interviewee can take the discussion in any possible direction after that. If this were a semi-structured interview, I would be expected to steer the conversation back to my research topic, but this does not apply to oral history; I was advised against asking questions that completely change the topic to something else I am interested in hearing my interviewee talk about because that would interrupt their storyline. To make me understand why this is not desired, my supervisors explained that my role is now to just give someone the opportunity to finally feel heard (and not like they are listened to just because they can provide the answers to a few specific questions). If this happens, the research goal is met. If the interviewee happens to want to be heard about the same or at least similar topic to what I initially had in mind, then that is a bonus.

By relinquishing control over the direction of my interviews and embracing a more open-ended approach rather than imposing my preconceived notions and expectations onto the conversations, I experimented with ways of doing research previously unfamiliar to me: resisting the urge to redirect the discussion to better fit my interests (an instinct that I have been training for the past two and a half years as a Bachelor student) and listening attentively to the stories shared by my interviewees instead, therefore allowing their narratives to guide the research process – so much so that my research question changed constantly up until the final stages of the research process.

While I was initially planning on researching public art placed in and around public transportation stations from Amsterdam South-East (and exploring both the occasional commuter's and the permanent resident's opinions on a few abstract installations, such as "Tension Pieces"), a recurring mention within my empirical material were more 'traditional' art pieces (i.e., statues, memorials) placed in and around busy transit zones (i.e., squares, plazas, shopping centres). The residents' preference for more concrete and culturally significant/inclusive/accessible installations over abstract ones, thus, explains the general sentiment that "Tension Pieces" does not fit within their neighbourhood.

"TENSION PIECES" versus OTHER ART INSTALLATIONS

One such example of art that fits better in the public space is, at least according to one of my interviewees, the 'Monument for Anton de Kom,' placed at the very top of the staircase next to the Anton de Komplein in Amsterdam South-East. Regarding this, he explains: "This statue, I think, is an example of art done more carefully and consciously. There was a process that involved the entire neighbourhood because four artists were asked to create a concept and then present it to the community, so that people could choose what they thought best reflected the legacy of Anton de Kom. This one was first carved from a big tree from Suriname, then later on came to the Netherlands and they put it in bronze, I think it is. Everyone more or less agreed "this is the one," because it clearly shows the brave Surinamese resistance fighter."

But this is not to say that it had never been contested: "Some people said how he was always wearing a suit whereas this statue shows his naked body... and they protested around 2 weeks before the unveiling because they still had an issue with the concept. But that has passed, it has settled down with time and the statue now has many different roles in society: you can get married nearby and then have your pictures taken at the statue;

there is a festival happening in that square sometimes; many protests symbolically end there because this man also protested colonialism, etc. So, it is more a place of community now, 10 years later – we can talk about how a monument can first be disconnected from the people, and how it can then reconnect with them 10 years later.”

In essence, my interviewee discussed three qualities which distinguish this particular artwork – extensive public engagement, a clear depiction of the subject matter, and functional roles within society –, all absent in the case of “Tension Pieces.” According to most interviewees, the “Tension Pieces” were vague and confusing, as abstract art often tends to be. What further complicated the issue for them was not being able to tell whether the rustiness of the material was intentional or caused by poor maintenance. But irrespective of its origin, the rusty piece was, for some, a brutal sight (because of the heavy- and industrial-looking materials), while for others, part of the backdrop (because there was nothing special about rusted metal since everybody had seen it before, so the installation became almost invisible).

This diversity of opinions informs the broader topic of interacting with abstract art, which another interviewee had explored more in-depth:

“It should always be the case with art that you think about what idea was behind it in the beginning and whether that still fits now. But this is very abstract work, so it just is what the artist says it is – you can’t really make more of it once you know their intentions... besides discuss your opinion, see if you agree or disagree with them. I personally don’t like it, it doesn’t impress me. And I don’t think it is in any way tangible for the people in the neighbourhood because most of them do not know how to interact with art, let alone abstract art, because they were never taught how to. And then they became adults... if you’re a single mother with 2 jobs, this would most likely not be one of your priorities.”

What this interviewee has added to the previous list of qualities was accessibility to diverse audiences, something that is, once again, lacking in the context of “Tension Pieces.” But their reflection is just as much a testament to the socio-economic divides that create and perpetuate such unequal opportunities when it comes to being able to decipher the meanings of abstract art, highlighting broader societal issues surrounding (access to) education.

CONCLUSION

Following a more open-ended strategy rewarded me with the following conclusion: Shlomo Koren’s “Tension Pieces” ultimately reflect a disconnect between artistic vision and community perception – despite the intention to enrich the urban landscape, this artwork has instead caused confusion among residents, who perceive it as incongruent with the neighbourhood’s identity and history.

Still, I might not have reached such a participant-centric conclusion were it not for my decision to employ the ‘oral history’ interviewing method, as advised by my supervisors), which essentially prioritizes the interviewees’ perspectives and allows them to shape the conversation based on their own experiences.

As such, the residents often illustrated the dissonance by juxtaposing their rather negative opinions on “Tension Pieces” with positive reactions to other, often less abstract, art installations in the area.

Ultimately, this contrast suggests that a deeper understanding of residents' opinions on what kind of public art can truly be integrated within their neighbourhood is crucial in creating inclusive and culturally resonant urban environments that respect – or at least consider – the diverse perspectives and lived experiences of those intended to be the consumers and/or residents of these spaces.