

Empowerment of Gender Voice – Sound Acts in Victoria Square

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ABSTRACT: This paper is about a participatory sound installation and action at Victoria Square in Athens, dealing with the social and gendered space, and specifically with the way that the inhabitants of the square gather around and socialize in certain places. The visitors of the square, mostly male immigrants, seek to create the conditions of a temporary 'home', which confronts the one they left behind. The project seeks to create conditions to empower the presence of women in the square, intensifying thus the social contradictions between public spheres, in a way that can lead to new understandings and appropriations of the space.

KEYWORDS: Sound acts, Empowerment, Gender, Public sphere.

1. Introduction

Square Victoria is an active and dense public space with certain social characteristics that make it different from the other Athenian squares. It includes groups of people with a big variety of nationalities; from Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Greece, Balkans, Africa and Romani people, who claim strongly their territorial in the square and often conflict with each other. I observed that the same is happening with male, female and transgender presence, with the male gatherings being continuous and dominant. The project focuses on this fragmentation of the square, socially and in terms of gender, which takes the form of various isolated social spaces, where women, mostly immigrants, appear weak and 'powerless'. Their presence is brief in time and manifest itself with a "weakness" in their voice, that is with murmurous, soft and low talking.

1.1. Addressing the problem

Visiting the square for almost one year, I observed that the frequent visitors, mostly immigrants from the Middle East, Afghanistan and Balkans, refugees and old Greek inhabitants, created different and isolated social spaces where the male presence was dominant. My gender was also a reason to realize that the approach of female visitors in the square, who were mostly immigrants, was difficult and powerless. Because of xenophobia, racism and dominant family structures, the isolation of women in the private area of their house was repeated in the space of the square, creating small isolated communication spheres that did not interact with others. Women frequented the square and met with each other, mostly when men were not there. Moreover, I observed that the social spaces intensively formed private soundscapes with a variety of sound sources used by the people, such as mobile phones, radio devices, televisions, speakers, and their voices. Eventually, I chose to work with sound as a tool of intervention, aiming to empower the presence of women in the square by recording their voices, during conversations I initiated with them. Then, at a later stage, I broadcasted them again in the same place, intensifying thus the social contradictions between public spheres, in a way that can lead to new understandings and appropriations of the place. The specific forms of the sound installation intended to produce new small-scale gatherings, encounters and conversations. While the long-range sources, such as speakers, are used to call people in large gatherings for political purposes or spectacles and allow one person to speak or overlap small conversations, short-range sources provide suitable conditions for conversations between few people around them. I discussed about my methodology with anthropologists, architects and sound artists and researched on relevant bibliography.

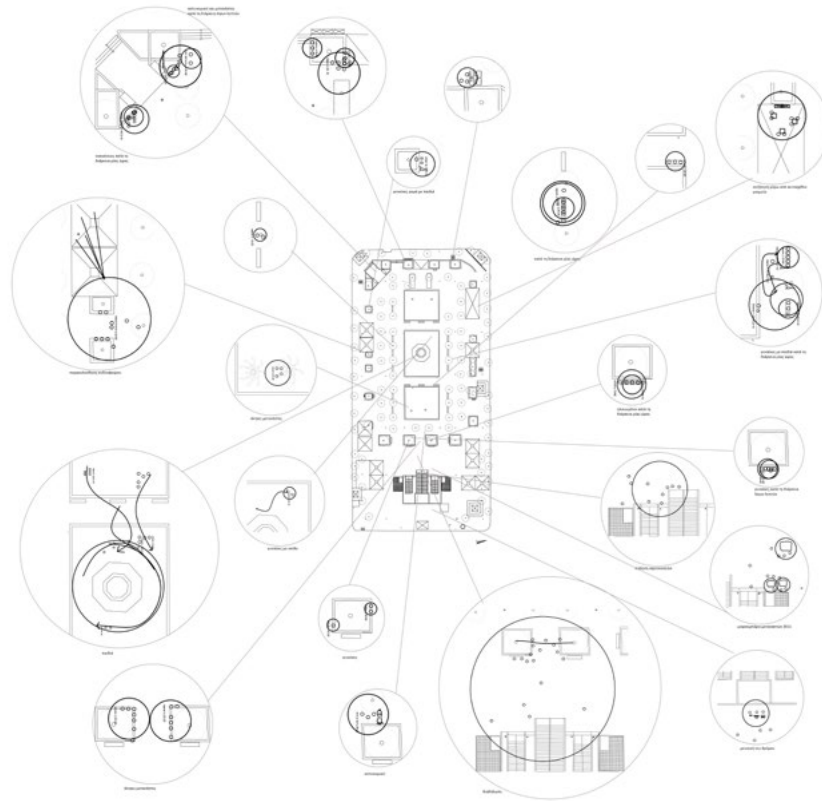


Figure 1. Social spaces in the square. (Graphic design by Angeliki- Marina Diakrousi)

2. Sound acts

The designed sound acts were developed in two phases.

2.1. Relational actions

In the first phase, I realized and recorded actions of conversations, within two months, with women in the square, as well as archived and ordered the collected material. I followed specific methodologies borrowing contemporary practices from the field of social anthropology, but also related to sound, after discussing with the anthropologists Konstantinos Kalantzis and Panos Panopoulos. During this period I provoked a series of conversations with women and recorded them with their permission. Some of them repulsed me, while others were willing to discuss about their presence to the square, and our meetings became more personal. Each meeting was developed depending on the person, the present conditions and chance. The languages used were English, Greek and Farsi and the women, with whom I talked, were: Katerina, Angeliki, Voula and Tonia from Greece, Yagana, Pari, Fatima and Fatima from Afghanistan, Agne and Emese from Letonia, Anna from Moldavia, Emma from USA and Nathalia from Brazil. The recorded talks were edited and categorized according to the different reactions derived from the conversations and topics related to personal experiences in Victoria Square, and in relation to other public spaces in their place of origin, memories of immigration or stories from their daily life.

2.2. Sound installation

The second phase is about the planning and realization of the in-situ broadcasting of the collected sound material and the direction of the new relations and conversations with the public, as a new performance. This performance lasted one afternoon on a Sunday of June 2015. The broadcasting of the sound was placed in specific areas where men were gathering, mostly around trees, and next to the benches where the conversations with women have been previously taken place. The installation was designed according to the sound sources used by the groups of people. It was made of five sound devices, similar to those used by the visitors, which were hacked, with the purpose to become a new sound tool.



Figure 2. Speaker reconstruction. (Photos taken by Angeliki- Marina Diakrousi)

During the action, the audio sources were independent from each other and hanged from five trees, which were part of the studied social spaces, often occupied by groups of male visitors. Each speaker was installed in the tree at the height of the ear. The volume of the sounds, the size and the position of the speaker were designed in such a way, so as to invite the inhabitants of the square to come closer so to listen and be in proximity, facilitating the communication between them. Each installation included different voices and sounds, covering selected segments from all the topics discussed. The set of the voices was played simultaneously and repeatedly, with frequent pauses so to leave space for the new talks.

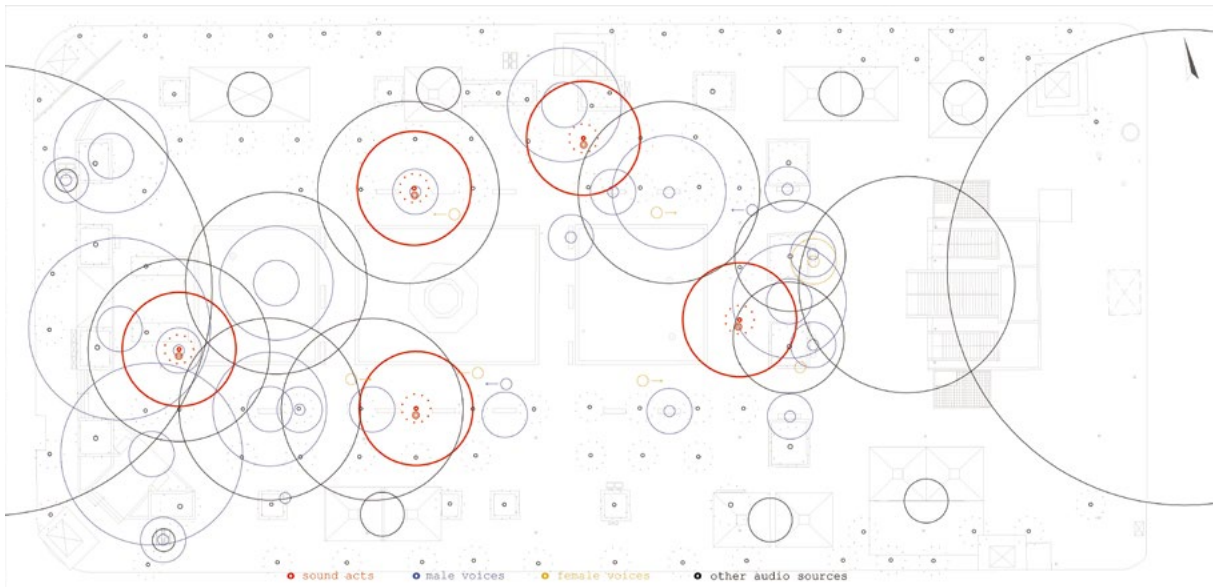


Figure 3. Sound installation points and soundscapes of the square. (Graphic design by Angeliki- Marina Diakrousi)



Figures 4 & 5. Spot of intervention. (Photos taken by Angeliki- Marina Diakrousi)

During the action, I have directed and instructed several persons to act as “facilitators”, giving some information on the action and distributing a flyer with a text of my personal experience, written in three languages (English, Greek and Farsi). The broadcasted female voices were abruptly intervening into the existing conversations in the specific places, giving the impression of an non-invited “absent” guest.

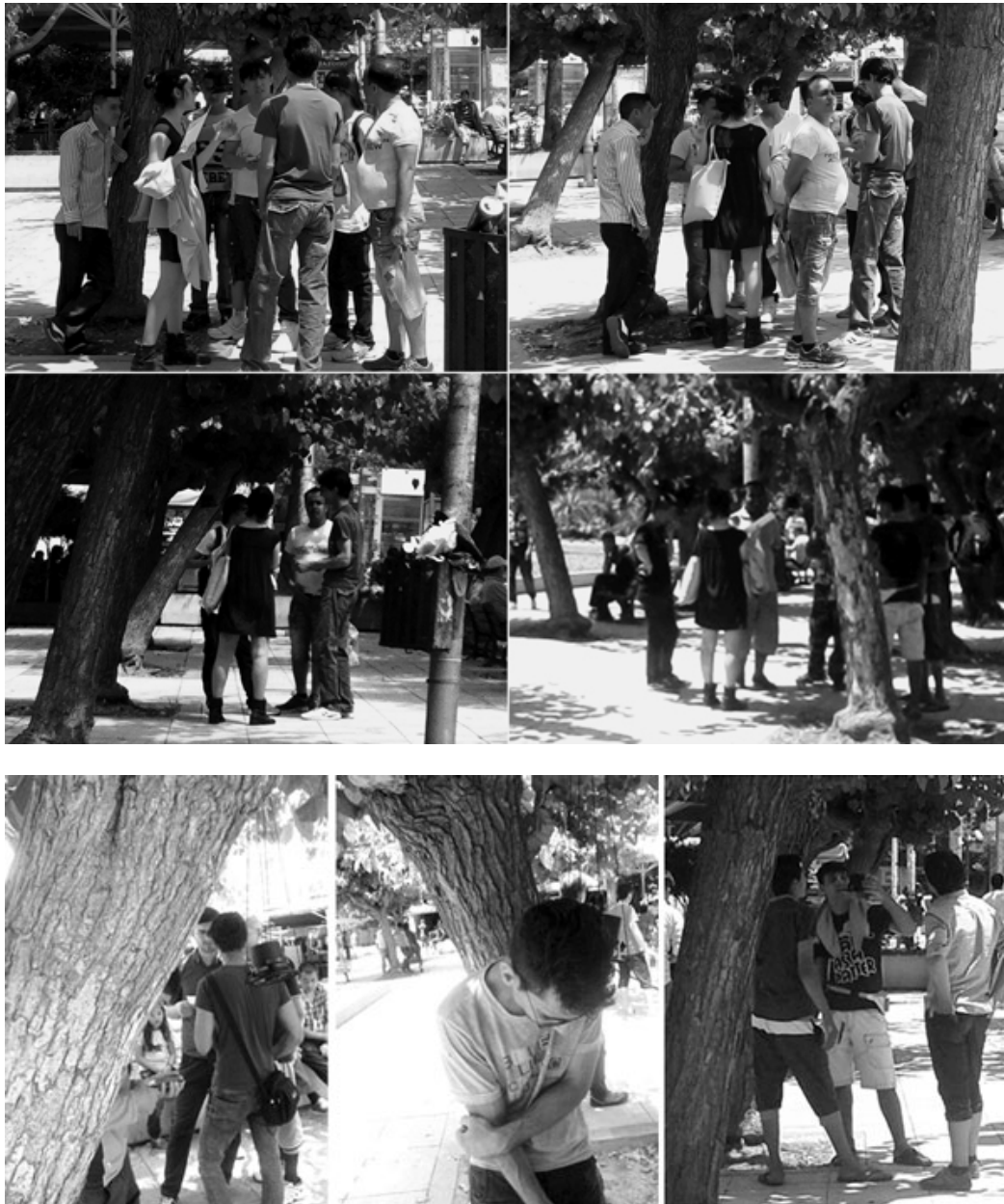


Figure 6 & 7. Sound acts.(Photos taken by Angeliki- Marina Diakrousi)

3. Afterthoughts

During the implementation of the project, several limitations and difficulties appeared, which finally proved useful. Because of the language limitation in the first phase, I could not talk with women coming from Iran and Afghanistan and talking Farsi. But, one Afghan, that I met there, agreed to be the interpreter for my communication with them. During the acts, also, some men from Afghanistan were offered to better translate the text from English to Farsi, writing it by themselves, so to be more understandable.

Overall, the action provoked intense conversations, confrontations and movements between the various groups, although some spots remained deserted or unchanged, as the

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