

Denise Ziegler

## **A City Never Lies**

Situational irony and the political impact of public urban space.

*I am approaching the theme of the political impact of public urban space from the point of view of a visual artist. In a post-Beuysian vein, I extend my workshop to the public space and work with its mechanisms and possibilities. My point of view is the one of a person walking through the city. The first part of the text looks into how city planning and artistic work can interact. In the second part an experimental artistic intervention is conducted using situational irony as a method for reflecting on the impact urban public space and its user can have. The text questions the concepts of urban space and public art and aims to contribute to the redefinition of concepts regarding how we look at and develop public urban space.*

How can comprehensive city planning be considered from an artistic perspective? By the term 'comprehensive' I want to widen the concept of city planning from infrastructure, buildings, streets, traffic etc. to include also social aspects of community life such as the needs of different age groups, the sense of comfort and security in the urban environment, or the behaviour of citizens as consumers in the public space. By the expression 'artistic point of view' I point to an experimental, practice-based research in which I conduct interventions designed to explore urban public situations and create new knowledge about them.

### **Research interventions in urban space**

How do we use urban space? Which are the places within public urban space that make us feel good, and why do they do so? Do the official concepts of city planners meet the needs of the actual users of the space? I addressed these questions mostly through physical and sculptural but also participatory interventions conducted in public space. These interventions are neither case studies nor ethnography but research interventions. (Hannula, Suoranta, Valdén 2005, 95). Through artistic research, they reflect upon people's consciousness regarding the status quo of their urban surroundings.

My idea of interventions in public space differs from the view held commonly in the 1970s, when they were seen “as a strategic action to confront the white cube of the institutionalized visual art museum” (Slager 2015, 61). Instead, my interest lies in the conditions of public space itself: I look at what certain situations in urban space reveal about the status quo of the city as a place to be in.<sup>1</sup>

## **Working in the city**

Working with and in urban space for me is tantamount to turning the entire urban space into a working place. Therefore my starting point is the city as a whole. The city is the workshop, the place where the work starts, and at the same time it is the direction where the work is heading. Henk Slager (2015, 28) demands that the focus in art practice should move from the end product to experimental and laboratory-style environments and the result of artistic research should be the gaining of new knowledge and experience. He calls artistic research a “laboratory without protocol” where the path to be followed is not clearly defined beforehand. (ibid., 38) In my own research I do have a protocol. It is to engage with the subject matter, the city, as much as possible. By that I mean that my involvement with the city is as a person, an artist and a researcher. I have to bring myself into line with the subject matter, in this case the city.

I conducted my research in the City of Pori in western Finland within a unique experimental knowledge production platform called Pori Urban Platform (PUPA), which operates within the Department of Art of Aalto University<sup>2</sup>. The City of Pori with its 85,000 inhabitants is a

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term *place* as particular part of public space. Further, I am talking about *situations*. By that I mean the combination of the place and the way, in which it is used.

<sup>2</sup> The PUPA platform was launched in 2015- It defines its goals as follows:

“Pori Urban Platform of Aalto University PUPA is a flexible experimental project platform in Pori University Consortium. It enables the units and people of Aalto University to carry out a multitude of diverse study, research, or artistic or design projects in Pori and Satakunta region.”

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The platform offers resources for the activities of the units, research groups, MA programs, researchers and artists in a new environment. It gives an opportunity to bring the teaching, research and artistic and other productions outside the capital region and its campuses. Pori and Satakunta region function as a living

living laboratory for the innovation platform. With its unbureaucratic infrastructure it is exceptionally suited to this kind of research.

### City planning and artistic research

I started by walking in and through the city, contemplating the *status quo* of certain public places and their environment. What do they know about themselves? That is, what kind of knowledge (memory, material, form, history) is embedded in the place itself and in the way it is used (services, traditions, habits). I aim at an individual and singular approach where knowledge of each building, street or citizen is valuable.

The point of my research is not to get answers to the questions above. City planning is a much more complex thing than just a “problem” and its “solution”. Among other things, it has to confront the new challenges of a post-industrial society (Streich 2014, 12).<sup>3</sup> According to Streich, the focus in city planning should be on opening a way for discussion and finding more anti-hierarchical, flexible and experimental approaches to the subject. In my view, artistic research with its peculiar way of asking questions is a valuable addition to other methods of city planning.

There is also need for development in the field of artistic research itself. The Switzerland-based organisation SARN states in its recently published book *Eighty-Seven Questions on Artistic Research* (Caviezel, Schwander 2015) that, after nearly 25 years of artistic research, scholarly statements have become well known and that artistic research must therefore open up to the impact it has on the rest of the world. The SARN book is inspired by *Findet mich das Glück?*, a book by the artists Fischli & Weiss (2007, 2003), which literally contains 87 questions. These questions express resent personal experiences of artists, curators and researchers among others. In the foreword of the book the curators write: “SARN’s aim is to

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laboratory where the social impact of the university can be seen directly in action. The project platform makes it possible to realize interesting courses, joint productions, site specific research and art, and to bring academic teaching and research out of the academy into the living reality.” (Aalto university, online document)  
The goal of the project is to build an innovation platform for urban development by gathering, combining and sharing in new ways the knowledge about urban space possessed by various research disciplines and stakeholders.

<sup>3</sup> Bernd Streich is professor for computer-aided design and planning methods in spatial planning and architecture at the Technical University Kaiserslautern, Germany.

investigate the impact of artistic research with a focus on non-school protagonists.” (Caviezel ed al., 2015) SARN’s curators invite us to reflect upon these questions and to accept “the current ambivalent situation in which there are no (simple) answers.” (Caviezel ed al., 2015) The book aims at an on going discussion. Questions as “Can artistic research be political?” (ibid., 49) or “Why does every artist, who reads a book once in a while, think s/he is doing research?” (ibid., 31) throw the ball to the reader, they also introduce gentle irony as a method: the questions aim only seemingly at answers while being “answers” themselves at the same time. (Caviezel ed al., 2015)

In this sense, recent city planning and artistic research have at least two things in common: first, both have to overcome existing structures: hierarchical-technological guidelines on the one hand and academic-scientific ones on the other. Second – which is what I want to show here – artistic research and city planning can both profit from and develop through an experimental or even ironic approach.

### **Ironic features in public space**

Streich (2014) discusses the importance of the so-called “bottom-up” principle in connection with city planning. This principle embraces the opinions of citizens as well as their opposition to intended changes in the city. Today, bottom-up planning is an established method of participation and negotiation with inhabitants (Streich 2014). My interest lies in a slightly different direction: instead of asking questions of inhabitants and involving them in the process, I address my questions directly to the infrastructure of the public space that I work with. I interrogate walls, fences, buildings and pedestrian ways. In so doing, I try to put aside as much as possible my previous knowledge and prejudices regarding public space. I look for a kind of key situation that would encapsulate the general atmosphere of the site so as to comprehend the place in question, that is, where it stands, where it is coming from and where it is going.

The most revealing places or situations are ones which contain some kind of surprising inversion – features of (situational or historical) irony. I will explain later why, from an artistic point of view, places with situational ironic features can reveal the *status quo* of public

urban space. As regards city planning development, Streich suggests irony as a useful tool to achieve change and development. He calls for subversive city planning that aims at looking critically at our habits of using public urban space and he suggests irony as an alternative approach to overcome set ways of acting and thinking. (Streich 2014, 14) The roots of subversive thinking lie, according to Streich, in their connection to humour, irony and satire (ibid., 29).

I might therefore argue that the abovementioned key situations with their ironic features are valid tools for contributing to the development of city planning. However, there is another reason why situations with ironic features have high potential value with regard to the development of public urban space. First, we have to look at where they originate and how they occur.

### **Places grown into irony**

The situations in public space that I look for are not “marked” in that they would somehow stand out clearly from their surroundings. Quite the opposite, they have a strong visual or situational connection to the surrounding space. They fit in the picture quite well. As a circumstance, they can often be even overlooked. Rachel Giora<sup>4</sup> states that : “The humorous effect [of ironic situations] is a result of introducing to the discourse a surprising message that still bears relevance to the topic under discussion” (Giora 1995, 245). Although Giora talks about verbal irony here, I feel her thoughts and insights are easily adaptable to situations in public space that contain features of irony.

Ironic situations in public urban space are not intentionally constructed as ironic, they came to grow into this ironic state. Such situations can be features of city planning from different periods that overlap today in the form of architectural elements that start to interact with one another and with their setting in an ironic way. They are examples of the ambiguity and diversity of the city.

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<sup>4</sup> Prof. Rachel Giora, Ph.D., Department of Linguistics, Tel Aviv University, Israel

## **A situation in public urban space is a political statement**

As I pointed out, ironic situations in public space are not easy to detect. They camouflage themselves as a backdrop to our every day life and our routines and easily slip our attention. We need more than subversive willingness (Streich 2014) to find and work with them. Slager describes an emerging strategy in site-specific artistic practice – *context-responsive research* – in which the new aesthetics of public art are seen as a manifest of the experience of space (Slager 2015, 62) He points out that, “In this aesthetics, the notion of space is understood as a discursive construct: space as a platform for knowledge, intellectual exchange, and cultural debate.” (ibid. 2015, 62) I like the concept of a context-responsive research and a spatial practice that focuses on generating differential spaces. This practice takes into consideration all medial aspects of a site such as circumstances, geographical location, historical facts, and groups of people among others and interconnects them in order to formulate a complex discursive account of the site. The context works as the momentum or as the driving force to motivate the research. (Slager 2015, 68) However, according to Slager this form of site-specificity is “ultimately *disconnected* from its concrete topographical space.” (ibid., 62) He says: “An indexical relation between discursive space and artistic interventions is no longer relevant. Consequently, a mobile, multi-faceted space comes into being as an ambulant field where aspects such as openness, mobility, and ambiguity express the involvement of today’s artistic practice.” (ibid., 62).

What I miss here is specificity, something that would make “things real” and connect them to real places (and real people) in urban public spaces. I also miss the researcher’s involvement with the subject. I think it is essential to visit and revisit places of interest physically, in person. It is very important to take urban spaces “literally” by engaging with them physically. As Michel de Certeau says: “the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered.” (Certeau 1988, 97). Interacting with and in public urban space is a political act, a statement to make the connection transparent between public urban space and its users. Olafur Eliasson talks about the interaction of humans regarding their experience of the Now. He sees the Now as an entity which is extended in time and space: “your now is my surroundings and vice versa” he states. (Morley 2010, p. 123) This means, every object in public urban space is connected to many Now’s of different people interacting with them and with each others (from their design to production and to daily use).

To my mind public urban space consists mainly of these interactions. (However, we have a quite narrow awareness of how big our influence on public urban space actually can be.) For me, working in and with public space is a political act contributing to a city development that questions hierarchical structures in physical space as well as in the organisation of society. To me, therefore, a political change of attitude is not possible without a change in the attitude towards the public urban space.

Although context-responsive research does contain quite many of the features I am looking for in artistic research, I still need, as I stated above, to make things as concrete as possible. That is why I want to elaborate on the use of artistic research interventions using an example.

### **Local logos at the department store**

Here is a found situation: a collection of 19 coats of arms hanging in two rows on a wall above the elevators in the cosmetics section of a department store in the City of Pori. Each wooden coat of arms is about 40 cm x 35 cm and they are all painted in bright colours. The coats of arms represent the 19 (former and current) counties of the Province of Satakunta (Western Finland).



Image 1: Coats of arms on a wall above the elevators at the cosmetics section of the Sokos department store in Pori, Finland

One would normally expect to see a collection of coats of arms in, say, a showcase at the town hall or in an office on top of a filing cabinet. With their calm and serene appearance, coats of arms represent permanency as well as traditional and local values. In this they differ from other imagery and objects in the department store, which is filled with visual noise.

Our expectations in respect of the two entities are quite different. The coats of arms symbolise the locality and its past. They symbolise municipal politics, traditions and slowly evolving social activities. The products put up for sale and their advertising arrangements at the cosmetics department point to the “world” and to promises for the future. They promise youth, beauty and “international” success. Being situated in the department store right next to each other, the difference between the two becomes quite obvious.

On the other hand, cosmetics and coats of arms have a great deal in common as regards their appearance: both use symbols and bright colours to signal what they represent. This apparent

similarity creates a paradox that contains a gentle irony. The irony originates from the fact that the two (coats of arms and cosmetics logos) inhabit different dialogues or discourses, although their visual appearance seems quite similar.

### **A new way of buying**

In order to understand where this particular ironic situation originates from we need to look into the history of the first client-owned chain of retailing cooperative stores in Finland (SOK, Suomen Osuuskauppojen Keskuskunta), founded in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The concept of client-ownership spread rapidly, and in the 1950s the first Sokos department store was opened in Helsinki. In the province of Satakunta, the opening of a department store in its capital, Pori, in the beginning of the 1970s was an important political event, one which brought together the different counties around a shared interest.

The coats of arms have been hanging on the wall above the elevators since the opening of the department store more than 40 years ago. They were brought to the store by representatives of the counties on the occasion of the store's inauguration on 13 September 1973. Some 30,000 people attended the opening celebrations, a marching band was hired to celebrate the event as well as more than ten detectives to prevent shoplifting. "A new way of buying" was the slogan of the store. The store represented a great social and political achievement, and being one of the biggest department stores at the time in Finland it was the pride of the Province of Satakunta. (*Satakunnan Kansa* 1973) The development and improvement of rural municipalities was a priority in regional politics at the time. In the beginning of the 1970s, the town council of Pori decides that "provincial goals have to be prioritised and urgently put in to such operation that reaching of provincial goals can be assisted efficiently... also the collaboration between the counties has to be enhanced..." (Satakuntaliitto, online document)

Against this background it becomes quite obvious how important the political gesture of bringing the coats of arms to the store was.

The coats of arms themselves were quite new at the time, most of them inaugurated in the 1950s and 1960s. To bring coats of arms to the new trading place was a very appropriate and dignified way of celebrating the event.

### **In the wrong place at the right time: the rise of an ironic situation**

Over time, the disparity between the static imagery of the coats of arms and the constantly changing and globalising visual appearance of the consumers brands began to grow. The paradoxical situation did not develop until a few decades had passed. Its irony stems from the surprising similarity of the logos of luxury cosmetic brands and the imagery of the coats of arms (bright colours, use of symbols, etc.). I also find it quite ironic to imagine, for example, the county of Noormarkku as a perfume or an odour.

For the emergence of an ironic situation, the coats of arms are in the wrong place at the right time. Why are they still on the wall in the department store? Maybe they simply were forgotten and nobody thought of taking them down.

### **The statements of ironic situations**

Ironic situations in public urban space are often hidden within the ordinary while also standing out from it. In a very special way, they point towards the extraordinary, the sublime. (I won't discuss the sublime in connection with the ironic situation any further as it would take more time is available).

The situations that interest me contain a gentle and subtle irony, one that is easily overlooked in everyday life.<sup>5</sup> They are gentle ironic occurrences rather than harsh clear-cut situations. Although the situations are gentle, the messages they contain are not some hazy negative

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<sup>5</sup> There are of course other artistic approaches to public space that employ irony. Here I want to mention one artist group that has had a strong impact on public space. Called "Porin kulttuurisäättö", the group organises events that are big in the context of the small City of Pori, such as the *Pori biennale* (2014) or the *Pori World Expo* (2015). The projects are eye catchers that adopt a fresh approach to interventions in public space while also containing direct institutional ironical critique. (Porin kulttuurisäättö, online document)

critique but very precise statements on the *status quo* of the city. They can be considered as a political statement forwarded through the infrastructure of public urban space. Therefore it is important to understand how a situational ironic message works.

Rachel Giora confirms the preciseness of ironic statements in her study of *irony and negation* (Giora 1995, 241). Giora points out that an ironic message is mostly formulated in an *affirmative* way even when it contains an indirect, but quite clear negation. This indirect negation is far more precise and unambiguous than a direct negation of the same topic would be. As an example, Giora uses the comment “What a lovely party” uttered at a lousy party. The implicit statement, or irony, of the utterance point to the “distance” of the party from being a lovely party, whereas the statement “What a lousy party” would indicate nothing about the degree of lousiness. It is the circumstance and tone of the affirmative message that specifies distinctively the meaning of the ironic message (Giora 1995). In the situation with the coats of arms described above, one might remark: “look how well they fit the situation” thereby pointing out how misplaced they actually are.

According to Giora, an ironic message also communicates far more than just the opposite of what is stated explicitly.

[...] irony as indirect negation differs from the traditional account in that it suggests that irony does not necessarily implicate its opposite. Rather, instead of cancelling the indirectly negated message and replacing it with another one (cf. Clark & Gerrig, 1984; Grice, 1975), I have argued that irony retains both the explicit and implicated messages so that the difference between them may be computed. This account suggests that the surface meaning of an ironic utterance is involved in both the processing and implicature of the utterance. It further suggests that the implicated message is more attenuated or mitigated than the “opposite of what is said”. (Giora 1995, 261)

Irony is a tool of rhetorical speech and as such it is a tool of political communication. Adapting the theory of traditional figures of speech, such as irony, to situations in public urban space opens up the possibility of a deeper understanding of the situation at hand. This understanding is useful for the next step in the research.

## **Restaging an ironic situation**

In order to better understand the concept of a situational ironic situation, I wanted to intensify the experience of situational irony at the department store by creating an artificial counterpart to the found situation. I adapted the same mechanism of irony to a new, constructed situation (i.e. an interventional artwork). The intervention therefore included – similarly to the coats of arms in the department store – an inversion arising from a misplacement of a work of art. The work also had to fit the surroundings in order to make the situational irony of the intervention effective.

Artistic practice allows me to engage in associative thinking and react experimentally to the original situation. I have also worked with found situations before: in my DFA research I developed a mimetic method for restaging found situations on different (poetical) levels (see Ziegler 2010).

The location of my intervention was a new shopping mall in Pori, the Puuvilla shopping mall, newly opened at the end of 2014. There are lots of stores in the Puuvilla mall that sell sportswear and supplies for outdoor living. One highly visible thing in the mall is that it has four giant screens and numerous smaller, standing “totem” screens that display continuous moving image advertising.

The intervention consisted of an experimental video work about the culture of friendship pennants (little flags with the logos of football or ice hockey teams that are exchanged before a match and given as a reward to the player exhibiting great effort and team spirit during the match). The video allowed me to bring local symbols of non-commercial identification into a venue highly charged with symbols of commercial identity.

The video piece entitled *Sain viirin* (‘I Got a Pennant’) was made in collaboration with local junior football teams. It depicts children’s hands hanging up pennants they had received as a reward for playing fair, one after another on a nail on the wall. The point of the video was to liken the friendship pennants of local sports teams (“local logos”) to the international brands of consumers goods sold in the shopping mall.



Image 2: *I Got a Pennant*, 2015 video, research intervention in the Puuvilla shopping mall, Pori Finland

My theme in the intervention was is the development of the self-esteem of individuals – in this case children and pre-teenagers – with reference to their urban surroundings. I wanted to juxtapose two different types of logos in their surroundings: the commercial ones you can buy and the ones you can only receive for fair play at a sports match.

My question is: can the (situational) ironic approach as a technique facilitate the communication of the difference between the two kinds of logos and the ideologies they represent? Will there be an inversion, i.e. a contradiction or contrast between the imagery and product advertisements in the shopping mall and my infiltrated images of the team-sport logos? Like the coats of arms, the images should both fit the surrounding yet be different enough to create an inversion and, eventually, situational irony. To be clear: There is no irony

in the video work itself, the irony is created on site in the intervention, there where the work interacts with the surrounding.

### **The missing features of a shopping mall**

The first screening of the work took place on 16 June 2015 from 10 am to 8 pm on all the moving image advertisement surfaces in the Puuvilla shopping mall in Pori. Watching the research intervention gave me a new understanding of the shopping mall as a place to be and of the impact it has on its users. The intervention and its ironic component provided a reference point to analyse the place. It allowed me to formulate an attitude towards the public urban space in question rather than for example just a negative critique of the shopping mall as a place to be in.

Purely formally, the video matched the surroundings quite well. The bright colours and shapes of the pennants had a lot in common with the logos and trademarks of products advertised in the shops. Yet the video stood out in a very peculiar way: the images in the video and the movements in particular are gentle and kind. Small hands are seen carefully hanging pennants on the nail (often using both hands), with one hand straightening the fringes of the pennant with a soft stroke of the fingers.



Image 3: *I Got a Pennant*, 2015 video, research intervention in the Puuvilla shopping mall, Pori Finland

It is the gentleness of these actions within the setting of a shopping mall that made the work ironic. The irony of the intervention made it abundantly clear that there is nothing gentle or kind about the concept and visual appearance of a shopping mall.

The intervention revealed a hidden violence that is a predominant feature in the mall. It is the violence of the exclusiveness of all activities at the mall that are directed towards the act of consumption. I consider situational irony – in the context described above – as a key player in the detection of a manipulative power structure as a relevant feature of this urban situation.

### **Experimental research in the city**

After the intervention people asked me whether the intervention was noticed by the public. That was not the point! This kind of experimental research does not aim at receiving a big audience or at shocking the viewer or at bringing art to the so-called general public.

In a post-Beuysian fashion, I extend my workshop to the public space and work with its mechanisms and possibilities. The only way this kind of work can succeed is that it involves no pressure for pre-determined results and sets no guidelines as to which part of the work is to be considered research and which part art, or both. Working in, with and for public space – ironically – demands that the artists involved have themselves overcome and rethought the predetermined expectations of how their works – whether they are part of artistic research or not – are received by the public.

This particular artistic intervention is an experiment that has no clearly defined end or aim with respect to how it should be received by the public. I do not think that it even needs to be received as a work of art. I agree with Christopher Frayling, who states that “artistic research does not begin with a predetermined set of questions or assumptions, but arises from the particular situations or contexts being investigated”. (Frayling 1997, 22) As artists Anette Maechtel and Kathrin Peters write in the foreword to their book about Hansa Viertel in Berlin, *die stadt von morgen* (‘The City of Tomorrow’) (Maechtel, Peters, 2008) reflection (such as artistic research) can have a great impact on urban space: “Urban space is a multi layered construction: It consist of architecture, streets and squares that organise confined spaces and visibilities. But it also consist of pictures and texts which describe and evaluate a place not without changing it by doing so.” (Maechtel ed.al., 2008)

Working in and for public urban space aims at change in a concrete material form as well as in a change of the attitude towards public urban space.

In contrary to the ‘white cube’ which as a exhibition space aims at minimizing the interaction of the artwork with the surrounding – “The outside world must not come in” (O’Doherty 1976, 15) – an intervention in public urban space is always interacting with the physical and social surrounding, it is therefore by nature a political act (regardless of whether or not the work itself has a political agenda).

To my mind the artist-researcher who involves herself in questions of city planning and public space is not primarily to become a creator of artworks (original genius, public art), but to serve the city as a complex organism and steer it into becoming a living, political artwork itself. In that way, the city is not just part of the experiment, it is engaged in doing its own experimental research.

To sum up the experience of working with situational irony, art and the political impact of urban space, I want to give you another example (of research intervention). This is a situational ironic intervention in a text about a horse whisperer's experience (horse whisperer training, online document):

While interacting with ~~horses~~ <sup>cities</sup> I constantly ask the same question which is, **"If I were you (a ~~horse~~ <sup>city</sup>), how would I interpret this information being presented?"** A ~~horse~~ <sup>city</sup> never lies, they show you through their reactions exactly how they understood the situation at hand. Now it becomes more of a conversation than a situation where many put the responsibility to learn upon the ~~horse~~ <sup>city</sup> instead of ourselves. I am a big believer that it is our responsibility to be clear, adjust, change or learn something new, when the ~~horse~~ <sup>city</sup> doesn't offer the reaction we are looking for, not the other way around.

Image 4: *The City Whisperer*, 2015, Denise Ziegler, research intervention in a text about a horse whisperer's experience

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Images:

Image 1: Denise Ziegler

Image 2: Jukka Juhala

Image 3: Jukka Juhala

Image 4: Denise Ziegler